2006

The coalition of the two brothers : Caesar and Thomas Rodney and the making of the American Revolution in Delaware

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January 2006

The Coalition of the Two Brothers: Caesar and Thomas Rodney and the Making of the American Revolution in Delaware

by

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A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

History

Lehigh University

December, 2005

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts/Science/Education.

December 7, 2005
Date

Thesis Advisor

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Abstract

The majority of people in Delaware prior to the American Revolution were conservative by nature and were either opposed to the idea of separation from Great Britain or did not believe such a conflict could be won. Only New Castle County, heavily dominated by Presbyterians, could be relied upon to support the principles of independence; both Kent and Sussex Counties would have preferred to remain aloof from the conflict. For the American Revolution to succeed in Delaware, at least two of Delaware's three counties had to accept the principles of independence, which meant that leaders from the counties of either Kent or Sussex had to join with their brethren in New Castle. A study of the minutes of the Delaware Assembly, minutes of the Committees of Correspondence and the Committees of Inspection, and letters of Delaware leaders of the time reveals how Caesar Rodney and his brother Thomas worked as a pair to keep the patriotic cause alive in Kent County and, by extension, in the state of Delaware.

Introduction

A statue stands before the courthouse in modern-day Wilmington, Delaware. Dedicated in 1923, it is the image of a man wearing a long coat and tricorn hat sitting proudly erect upon a galloping steed.[1] This figure was created to honor the deed of Caesar Rodney, Delaware's favorite son. He was a delegate to the Second Continental Congress in that pivotal year of 1776. When Thomas McKean and George Read, the two other delegates from his colony, deadlocked over a vote concerning Richard Henry Lee's resolution for independence, the very ill Rodney rode all through the night of July1-2, covering more than eighty miles of bad roads and through a thunderstorm, to be in Philadelphia in time to cast his own vote and break the tie in favor of the patriotic cause.

Caesar Rodney's ride for independence is the only reason his name is remembered by anyone outside of a few historians. It is the kind of Revolutionary War myth parents tell their children to underline the heroism of America's founding fathers. The statue on Rodney Square is not an accurate representation. The bronze figure is strong and vigorous; Rodney was forty-seven years old, exhausted, and suffering from asthma and a cancer that had disfigured his face to the point that he wore a green silk scarf to cover it.[2] The disease would kill him eight years later. Nor was it likely that he rode all of the way from Dover to Philadelphia; his brother Thomas recalled him setting

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1 William P. Frank, *Caesar Rodney, Patriot* (Wilmington: The Delaware American Bicentennial Commission, 1975), 12.

2 Ibid.

out in a carriage, while his colleague, Thomas McKean, remembered meeting him at the State House door in Philadelphia, wearing the boots and spurs of a horseback rider. The only mention Caesar Rodney himself ever made of his grueling journey was a letter written July 4, 1776, mentioning a ride through "thunder and rain."[3] The truth probably lies somewhere between the accounts of Thomas Rodney and Thomas McKean; likely Caesar began his journey in a carriage but left it behind in favor of horseback when the roads became too difficult for a carriage to traverse. Delaware's roads were notoriously bad during the revolutionary period, as its inhabitants relied on the many waterways for transportation.[4]

In the broad scheme of revolutionary events, Rodney's midnight ride was not particularly significant. It cannot be said that Rodney saved American independence. Lee's resolution had already passed with a majority of colonies supporting it; what the delegates wanted was an appearance of unanimity. And even in the final vote, the colony of New York abstained from the vote because its delegates had never been issued clear instructions by its government. If Delaware had remained stalemated, it would have further marred Congress's hopes for unanimity, but Lee's resolution would still have passed. All Rodney's race to cast his vote in time accomplished was to put the tiny colony of Delaware in step with the rest of its sister colonies – and to cement his own

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3 George Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney 1756-1784* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1933), 94.

4 John A. Munroe, "The Philadelawareans: A Study in Relations Between Philadelphia and Delaware in the Late Eighteenth Century," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 69 (1946):133-4.

reputation as a radical. Irate conservatives back home subsequently voted him out of the Assembly and cast him off as a delegate in the coming fall. [5]

Although the importance of Rodney's midnight ride to the fate of the United States is debatable, it still bears a closer investigation. After all, if Rodney's eight mile dash to Philadelphia was indeed unnecessary, why did an ill and exhausted man undertake it? What many historians and Delawareans tend to overlook are the reasons why Rodney felt compelled to make that ride through "thunder and rain," namely that one of his fellow delegates, George Read, was a moderate who voted against the resolution and that Rodney himself was not present at Congress because he had spent the last few weeks of June putting down a loyalist insurrection in Sussex County, Delaware.[6] Conservatives and outright loyalists were in the majority in Delaware and remained so for the entirety of the war. In 1780, John Adams wrote "[there are] in this little state [of Delaware] from various causes, more Tories in proportion than in any other."[7] He did not mean it as an exaggeration. By the time he wrote those words, the Delaware State had witnessed at least three uprisings and was in the middle of yet another. Trading with the British ships that cruised the Delaware River was so blatant in Sussex County that on one occasion, when the Whigs offered money for information about offenders, the Tories

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5 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 103-106 passim.

6 Ibid., 92-3.

7 Harold B. Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware* (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1977), 9.

topped their reward.[8]

Caesar Rodney rode to Philadelphia to vote because he believed it could be disastrous for Delaware to stand opposed to the other colonies. He made the ride because independence was a step he and his brother Thomas, along with a handful of others, had been actively working towards for at least the past two years. Historian William Baskerville Hamilton wrote: ". . . in Kent and Sussex. . . the Rodneys, Haslet, John Dagworthy, John Jones and a few others dragged along a hostile majority."[9] There is enough evidence to indicate that Hamilton's assessment is correct, that the majority of people in Delaware, including most of the colony's leaders, identified themselves as British and had no great desire for independence. It took the efforts of a dedicated minority to bring the Revolution to Delaware. At the forefront of this dedicated minority were the Rodney brothers, Caesar and Thomas. It is not an exaggeration to state that the Revolution would probably not have been successful in Delaware without the leadership of the Rodneys.

Even though Delaware was the second smallest of the original thirteen states, it could be argued that on the eve of the Revolution, Delaware was as important to the fate of the United States as it would ever be. It had a population of about thirty-seven thousand people, about two thousand of whom were African Americans, both free and enslaved. This population was fairly evenly spread through the three counties of New

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8 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 68.

9 William Baskerville Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney, Revolutionary and Builder of the West* (London: Duke University Press, 1953), 16.

Castle, Kent, and Sussex, which were further divided into sections known as hundreds. Over a century of boundary disputes with Maryland finally ended in 1774. Through an error, Delaware gained more territory from Maryland than it rightfully should have claimed: the boundary line was drawn at Cape Henlopen, but the surveyors mistook the farther-south Fenwick Island for Cape Henlopen. Delaware was only approximately one hundred and ten miles long and thirty-five miles wide at the southern border, but it contained a greater population than Georgia or the city of Philadelphia did at the time – although those distinctions would not last for much longer.[10]

Delaware was important to the fate of the United States in other ways. The Christiana route, which provided vital communication between Baltimore and Philadelphia, was protected during the Revolution.[11] The mills in the Brandywine area were needed to make the bread for feeding America's troops. In 1777, with the British advancing, George Washington ordered all the mills in the Brandywine area to be dismantled and their grindstones hidden so the enemy could not use them.[12] During the later years of the war, the Delaware Continentals, under the support of a government headed by Caesar Rodney, became known as the best uniformed and equipped regiment

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10 John A. Munroe, *Colonial Delaware, A History* (Millwood, New York: KTO Press, 1978), 167.

11 Munroe, "The Philadelawareans," 131-2.

12 John A. Munroe, *Federalist Delaware, 1775-1815* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1954), 29.

in the army, legendary for their fighting skills.[13] As Delaware was by nature a deeply conservative, even loyalist colony, the outcome of the war may have been affected if the patriot faction had not managed to keep in power for the majority of the war years. During the early part of 1777, the year in which the conservatives held power in Delaware, much trading went on with the British while members of the Assembly looked the other way. Had Lord Howe chosen to approach Philadelphia via the Delaware River rather than the Chesapeake, he may have been able to assemble a willing colonial militia to aid and support him.[14] Delaware could have become a stronghold of Tories, a place where the British could have easily recruited willing allies to feed and equip them. The disturbance would undoubtedly have spread to Maryland, as most riots that took place in Delaware inevitably did.[15] At the very least, it would have made the winning of the war extremely difficult for the Americans. At worst, Delaware's defection could have altered the course of American history.

Caesar Rodney and his brother Thomas were ideally placed to support the cause of independence in Delaware. Delaware consisted of three counties: New Castle, Kent, and Sussex. Presbyterian-dominated New Castle was the only one of the three counties that infallibly supported the patriot cause.[16] The people of Kent and Sussex tended to be

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13 Christopher Ward, *The Delaware Continentals 1776-1783* (Wilmington: The Historical Society of Delaware, 1941), 9 and 17.

14 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 3.

15 Ronald Hoffman, *A Spirit of Dissension: Economics, Politics, and the Revolution in Maryland* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973), 231.

16 Munroe, "The Philadelawareans," 146.

conservative, or even loyalist. Historians like Gary B. Nash contend that the Revolution was made by the populace and not by the leaders, but the evidence does not support this conclusion in Delaware, which had been ruled by essentially the same party of entrenched elites since 1704.[17] The common folk of Delaware certainly played a part in the Revolution and quite frequently voiced their dissent through uprisings or other forms of public unrest, but the true power rested in the hands of the wealthy. At least two thirds of the populace in Delaware was illiterate, and judging from the way the same leaders were repeatedly elected, either not interested in changing the political system or incapable of effecting such a change. Without strong patriot leadership from either Kent or Sussex to support New Castle, Delaware would not have supported the recommendations of Congress. The Christiana route may well have remained unprotected, and the Delaware Continentals would not have become a respected regiment. Caesar Rodney and his brother Thomas kept the cause of independence alive in the entire state of Delaware by acting as committed patriots in a moderate county. "The Rodneys," wrote William Baskerville Hamilton in *Thomas Rodney, Revolutionary and Builder of the West*, "were leaders in bringing on the Revolution in Delaware."[18] Hamilton, however, failed to develop this thesis, preferring to focus on Thomas's career, portraying him as a hot-headed and often delusional man who eventually redeemed himself with a career as a judge in Mississippi. Caesar's genuine contributions to the

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17 Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Viking Books, 2005), 9-12.

18 Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney*, 16.

patriot cause in Delaware have been overshadowed by the theatrics of his epic ride, and the very few biographies of him that exist mostly confine themselves to eulogy. The most recent, Jane Harrington Scott's *A Gentleman as Well as a Whig*, while an admirable resource, does little more than chronicle the events of Caesar's life without any attempt at analysis. No one has ever made a close examination into how Caesar and Thomas Rodney worked as a pair. Yet together, these two brothers accomplished what neither could have managed separately: they manipulated the Revolution into being in Kent County, and by extension, into Delaware.

Prior to the Revolution, the official title of the colony was not Delaware, but the Three Lower Counties of New Castle, Kent, and Sussex on the Delaware River, or the Lower Counties in brief. It was first referred to as the Delaware State during the extralegal meeting of the Assembly on June 15, 1776. The title became official during the Constitutional Convention in August of the same year. For the purpose of this essay, the colony will be referred to interchangeably as the Lower Counties and Delaware. Also, in Revolutionary era documents, the terms "Tory," "loyalist," and "moderate" are used interchangeably, as are "Whig" and "patriot." To avoid as much confusion as possible, "loyalist" and "Tory" will be used to describe only those men who openly supported the British side, while those who were merely conservative in their politics will be known as "moderates." "Patriot" and "Whig" will refer to those who supported independence. All the spelling in the quotes has been modernized, but the grammar has been left untouched, the better to retain the original meanings.

Only the most basic facts are known about the early life of Caesar and Thomas Rodney. The Rodney family, or Rodeney, as it was sometimes styled, was descended from a well-regarded English line that could be traced back to the thirteenth century. The Rodneys possessed a family crest, a motto, and ties to British royalty.[19] At some point in the family history, probably in the sixteenth century, a William Rodney married the daughter of Thomas Caesar, an Italian nobleman.[20] Many sons of the family were thereafter baptized "Caesar" in honor of the union.

The paternal grandfather of Caesar and Thomas Rodney was William Rodeney, who came to America with William Penn. William Rodeney first resided in Maryland and Philadelphia before settling in Kent County, Delaware, where he became a man of prominence. He was the first speaker of the house of the Delaware Assembly, which met in 1704 after breaking away from the Pennsylvania Assembly.[21] Caesar Rodney Sr., the father of Caesar Rodney, the subject of this essay, and Thomas Rodney, his brother, was the youngest of William Rodney's children. He outlived all of his siblings to inherit his father's wealth, which consisted of several farms. Caesar Rodney Sr. never held a public office and accomplished little of note during his lifetime.

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19 J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Delaware 1609-1888, Vol.1* (Lewes, Delaware: Delmarva Roots, 2001), 203.

20 Frank, *Caesar Rodney, Patriot*, 7.

21 Jane Harrington Scott, *A Gentleman as Well as a Whig, Caesar Rodney and the American Revolution* (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2000), 15.

His wife was Elizabeth Crawford, the daughter of an Anglican missionary named Thomas Crawford. Caesar and Elizabeth were wed on October 18, 1727, with the bride's father performing the ceremony. The first of their children, Caesar Rodney Jr., the signer of the Declaration, was born a year later on October 7, 1728.[22] Seven more children followed. Thomas was the last, born on June 4, 1744.[23] Caesar was the only one of the Rodney children to receive anything approaching a formal education. He was sent to the Latin School in Philadelphia when he was thirteen or fourteen years old. Presumably Elizabeth Rodney, as the educated daughter of a minister, was responsible for the remainder of her children's education. Only a year after Thomas' birth, Caesar Rodney Sr. died, leaving seven children under the legal age (daughter Sarah had died young). The orphan's court chose Nicholas Ridgely, a prominent Kent County landowner, as Caesar Rodney Jr.'s guardian. Nicholas Ridgely had a son, Charles, who would become a noted politician alongside Caesar later in life. It is important to note Caesar's connection to the Ridgely family, for they undoubtedly influenced his choice of parties when he entered politics later in life.

Evidence indicates that Caesar was the dominant figure in Thomas's life, closer to being a father figure than an elder brother. This is not surprising as Thomas was not even a year old when his father died and there were sixteen years between him and Caesar. There is little doubt that of all the Rodney siblings, Caesar and Thomas were the closest. Caesar chose Thomas to run his personal affairs whenever he was away on

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22 Scott, *A Gentleman as Well as a Whig*, 16.

23 Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney*, 5.

business, and most of the letters George Ryden assembled for his excellent collection, *Letters to and From Caesar Rodney 1756-1784*, are addressed from one to the other. At some point after her husband's death, Elizabeth Rodney married a man named Thomas Wilson and had two more children, and Thomas Rodney lived with this family until he came of age. Although no records survive that relate how Thomas felt about his stepfather Thomas Wilson, a note in his "autograph book" reveals that he moved out of his step-family's farm and into Caesar's house as soon as he turned eighteen.[24] Caesar himself, as eldest son, likely took on a great deal of responsibility for running the various farms after his father's death. There is no doubt that he took his responsibilities as head of the family seriously and had no hesitation in doling out advice or admonitions to his younger siblings, as evidenced in a letter written to his brother Daniel, who was living an indolent life that displeased Caesar.[25] Further evidence that Caesar was a father figure to Thomas is revealed in Thomas's later writings. In a journal entry entitled "Friends and Fellow Citizens," Thomas set down his belief that virtue was transmitted from fathers to sons, but instead of using his own father as an example of virtue, he referred to his brother Caesar.[26]

Caesar never married, which is rather unusual, considering both the era in which

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24 Thomas Rodney, Thomas Rodney's Commonplace Book, 1773, Thomas Rodney Collection, Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington.

25 Scott, *A Gentleman as Well as a Whig*, 16-18.

26 Thomas Rodney, "Friends and Fellow Citizens," 1791, from the autograph book of Thomas Rodney, Thomas Rodney Collection, The Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington.

he and his social status. There is supposedly a letter in the keeping of the Ridgely family wherein Caesar professed his love for one Mary Vining, the step-daughter of Nicholas Ridgely, Caesar's guardian. She turned him down in favor of Charles Inglis, an Anglican rector who would become a close friend of Charles Ridgely, Nicholas' son.[27] Some of the more romantic historians, such as William P. Frank, have speculated that Caesar never married after losing his true love, but others claim it was the cancer that kept Caesar from marriage. A new speculation is that Caesar either looked upon his younger siblings as his children and hence felt no need to marry, or, conversely, his younger siblings (especially Thomas) took the place of a family of his own. Thomas married Elizabeth Fisher, the daughter of Quakers, on April 8, 1771, and the couple had two children: Caesar Augustus, born January 4, 1772, and Lavinia, born January 16, 1775.[28] Caesar Augustus would become Caesar's heir, and to a certain extant, Caesar appropriated him entirely. Even today, some careless scholars mistake Caesar Augustus for Caesar's son instead of Thomas's.

Although Thomas married a Quaker, the Rodney brothers were Anglicans. This would later make them an anomaly in Kent, as they were Anglicans in a region where Anglican was virtually synonymous with Tory. Many Anglicans in Delaware during the Revolutionary period changed their faith to Methodism, but neither Caesar nor Thomas gave up their original faith. In his will, Caesar insisted that his heir, Thomas's son Caesar

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27 Mabel Lloyd Ridgely, *What Them Befell, The Ridgelys of Delaware and Their Circle in Colonial and Federal Times: Letters, 1751-1890* (Portland, Maine: The Anthoesen Press, 1949), 161-2.

28 Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney*, 7n.

Augustus, be brought up in the Anglican faith.[29] Caesar had friends among Anglicans and Presbyterians alike, but during the Revolutionary era, Thomas appears to have drawn most of his companions from the Presbyterians. This appears to be typical of Thomas; he was the sort of man who would easily repudiate old comrades when they disagreed with him. Not so Caesar, who preferred to be on amicable terms even with his adversaries.

Indeed, despite the affection they held for one another, the two brothers could hardly have been more different in terms of personality. Caesar was patient, prudent, cautious, and amiable. Thomas wrote that his brother was "generally esteemed and indeed very popular," and possessed "a great fund of wit and humor."[30] While Thomas Rodney's opinion should not always be taken at face value, his assessment of his brother in this case was probably accurate. Caesar's humor is borne out in his surviving letters, and it was a quality John Adams remarked upon when he was first introduced to Caesar.[31] Furthermore, although a man in Caesar's position had to have made enemies, not a breath of suspicion or ill-will towards him remains in any surviving account. Even those who disagreed with him seemed to respect him.

Thomas, in contrast to his elder brother, had a talent for both making enemies and for sensing persecution around every corner. Harold B. Hancock, one of the great authorities on colonial Delaware, described Thomas Rodney as an "eccentric and

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29 Caesar Rodney's Will, as recorded in the Office of the Register of Wills, original in the Delaware Public Archives, Wilmington.

30 Thomas Rodney Papers, undated, Thomas Rodney Collection, Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington.

31 Frank, *Caesar Rodney, Patriot*, 10.

unstable" man who "adored his elder brother."[32] "Adored" might be too gentle a word. Even a brief perusal of Thomas's papers – and he wrote literally hundreds of letters and journal entries – reveals a near obsession with his older brother, including a fascination with history, specifically as it related to the name Caesar. Because of Caesar, Thomas came to the conclusion that his family was descended from Julius Caesar himself.[33] Indeed, Thomas always felt that the Rodneys in general and himself in particular were destined for greatness, and he had visions of angels and saints to back him up.[34] William Baskerville Hamilton makes much of Thomas Rodney's delusions, but in truth, Thomas did not begin to record these visions until the 1790's, when Caesar was dead and Thomas perceived himself abandoned and forgotten. Rather than a wild-eyed visionary, there was something of the earnest son trying to please his father in Thomas's actions during the Revolution. Thomas had never shown any great interest in politics until Caesar left him in control of his affairs when he departed for Philadelphia in 1774, but afterwards, he threw himself energetically into the business of the Revolution. And although Thomas made many mistakes and damaged the patriot cause as much as he forwarded it, the Revolution would not have come to Kent County without his action.

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32 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 9.

33 Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney*, 3-4.

34 Ibid., 25.

Delaware and Pennsylvania

Before the contribution of the Rodney brothers can be understood, a brief attempt must be made to explain Delaware's relationship to Pennsylvania, the colony with which it shared a governor. It is a mistake, and a common mistake at that, to assume the Three Lower Counties of New Castle, Kent, and Sussex on the Delaware River were no more than an offshoot of the larger and more significant colony of Pennsylvania to the north. Richard Alan Ryerson, in his book *The Revolution is Now Begun,* theorized that in Pennsylvania, the coming of the Revolution allowed the more radical elements of society to seize power from the entrenched elites by forming committees that gradually took control of the government.[35] While William Baskerville Hamilton in *Thomas Rodney, Revolutionary and Builder of the West* describes the victory of the Revolution in Delaware as "the work of an organized and purposeful minority," which sounds similar to Ryerson's findings, no such exchange of power took place in Delaware.[36] Furthermore, Arthur M. Schlesinger claimed in his book *Prelude to Independence* that newspapermen, in retaliation to the Stamp Act, printed anti-British propaganda and set the American Revolution in motion.[37] Delaware had no printing presses of its own prior to the

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35 Richard Alan Ryerson, *The Revolution is Now Begun, The Radical Committees of Pennsylvania 1765-1776* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 254-5.

36 Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney*, vii.

37 Arthur M. Schesinger, *Prelude to Independence, The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 208-213.

Revolution and took all its papers from Philadelphia. If Schlesinger's theory is correct, logically, Delaware should have followed a similar course to Pennsylvania. But this is not the case. The politicians chosen in Delaware after 1776 were drawn from the same pool as those before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The structure of Delaware's government remained essentially unchanged after the Revolution. An exploration of the history between these two colonies will help to explain why they followed such diverse paths during the Revolution.

It is true that the Lower Counties were economically and socially bound to the city of Philadelphia. Sloops loaded with Delaware wheat – which was considered to be of finer quality than Pennsylvania wheat – Indian corn, and lumber made their way up the Delaware River to return laden with tea, tobacco, cloth, and other goods a metropolis could provide.[38] The people of the Lower Counties received most of their printed information from Philadelphia as well, making that city Delaware's strongest tie to the world outside the tiny colony. The great majority of men who rose to political prominence in Delaware prior to and during the Revolutionary years had strong ties to Philadelphia. Thomas McKean and John Dickinson both kept homes there. Caesar Rodney had attended school in Philadelphia as a youth and frequently sought the advice of Philadelphia physicians in his search for a cure for his cancer. His brother Thomas ran a store in Philadelphia for a few years prior to the Revolution. George Read and John McKinly numbered many of the prominent men of Philadelphia among their social acquaintances. Some men, like Thomas McKean, eventually forsook a political career in

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38 Munroe, "The Philadelawareans," 130.

Delaware in favor of the larger renown they could win in Pennsylvania.

Yet despite their many ties to Philadelphia, none of these men from Delaware considered the two states as one unit. Long established precedent was against such thinking. The Lower Counties had nearly fifty years of history behind them before William Penn was granted his charter for Pennsylvania in 1681, and the history is dense and convoluted. Briefly stated, Delaware was first settled by the Dutch in 1631 in an area that is roughly the same site as modern day Lewes.[39] This small colony, Zwanendael (Valley of the Swans), was wiped out by Native Americans before two full years had passed, but its brief existence later barred Lord Baltimore's claims to the lower half of the state. After Zwanendael's demise, a Dutch-Swedish cooperation titled the New Sweden Company established the first permanent settlement in Delaware in 1638.[40] The outpost consisted of Dutch, Swedish, and Finnish settlers. Later, after the Swedish government lost interest in the project, the Dutch took total control over the operation.

When William Penn was granted a charter for the Lower Counties in 1682, the territory had already been conquered by the English, retaken by the Dutch, and then taken once more by the English. Before Penn, the title to the Lower Counties was held, rather loosely and dubiously, by the Duke of York, whose charter did not technically extend to the land west of the Delaware River. Lord Baltimore of Maryland also believed that the territory fell under his jurisdiction. The boundary dispute with Maryland would not be

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39 Munroe, *Colonial Delaware*, 9.

40 Ibid., 15.

finalized until nearly a hundred years later, in 1774.[41] Penn and Baltimore were more interested in gaining access to the Delaware River than in more territory. Pennsylvania and the Lower Counties were always treated as two separate and distinct territories during these debates. In Penn's original charter for Pennsylvania, he was not allowed to lay claim to any land that came within a twelve mile radius of the city of New Castle.[42]

By the time of William Penn, the people of the Lower Counties were a hodgepodge of Swedish, Dutch, Finnish, English, Scots-Irish, and Welsh settlers, to name a few. The first African to set foot in the Lower Counties arrived in 1639, and most certainly there were Native Americans present as well, somewhat masked within the scanty records that remain.[43] The settlers of Delaware were accustomed to long periods of neglect, of ships failing to bring supplies from the mother countries, of fending for themselves. As a colony, Delaware was accustomed to making do by itself. The settlers, having already gone through many changes of government, probably viewed the arrival of Penn as more of the same. The new people who arrived with Penn were predominantly Anglicans and Quakers.

One of William Penn's first acts was to set up a legislative branch of government. The first Assembly, which was attended by men from both Pennsylvania and the Lower Counties, was held on December 4, 1682. On December 6, the Three Lower Counties

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41 Munroe, *Colonial Delaware*, 244.

42 George H. Gibson, ed., *The Collected Essays of Richard S. Rodney on Early Delaware*. (Wilmington: The Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Delaware, 1975.), 59.

43 Munroe. *Colonial Delaware*, 18.

entered into an Act of Union with the Province of Pennsylvania, which was intended to meld the two colonies into one. Evidence indicates that this act was Penn's own wish; no petitions ever circulated in the Lower Counties expressing a desire for union.[44] In practice, the so-called union was to be short-lived. Problems between the province and the Lower Counties arose as soon as 1687 and only grew worse in the 1690's.[45] Quarrels arose over the judiciary system. Assemblymen from rapidly growing Pennsylvania came to resent that their opposites from the little Lower Counties could effectively block legislation. The death knell for the union came in October 1701, when the Assembly met in Philadelphia. The year before they had met for the first time – and last time – at New Castle. At the Philadelphia Assembly, a bill was read for the confirmation of the acts passed in New Castle, essentially questioning if laws passed in the Lower Counties should have force in Pennsylvania.

The Delawarean members of the assembly realized that their neighbor to the north was bound to become a large and more powerful colony, a colony that could engulf their own. Historically, Delaware has always been leery of outside influence, and the Philadelphia Assembly's bill was seen as the first step in Pennsylvania taking over the government of Delaware.[46] In protest, nine members of the Assembly for the Lower Counties, including Caesar and Thomas Rodney's grandfather William Rodeney, walked out of the meeting. An attempt was made at reconciliation, but Penn surrendered to the

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44 Gibson, ed., *The Collected Essays of Richard S. Rodney*, 60-62.

45 Ibid., 66-67.

46 Munroe, *Colonial Delaware*, 227.

inevitable. The Lower Counties held their own Assembly in 1704, and from then on, each government of the two colonies was separate, although they continued to share the same governor. In 1708, the Assembly of the Lower Counties considered attempting to throw off Penn altogether.[47] But already the rule of the proprietary governor was so light that the effort was abandoned. By the time of the Revolution, the governor came to Delaware only once or twice a year to place his stamp on bills passed by the Assembly. Although the governor had the power of veto, he rejected very few bills and, alone out of all the thirteen colonies, Delaware never had to send its laws to the Crown for approval. The argument could be made that Delaware was the most independent colony of the original thirteen, which would help explain why so many of its people were contented with the status quo and reluctant to rebel against Great Britain.

After these shaky beginnings, relations between the Lower Counties and its governor became amicable. William Penn's heirs were Anglicans, not Quakers, which pleased the mostly Anglican Delaware Assembly and smoothed relations between them. Caesar Rodney was a personal friend to both John and Richard Penn in the second half of the eighteenth century and in 1775 accounted them both as "great friends to Liberty."[48] Pennsylvania's Assembly, with its strong Quaker influence, was not so pleased with either the proprietary governors or what it viewed as the preferential treatment given to the Lower Counties. The people of the Lower Counties were exempt from paying certain

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47 Gibson, ed., *The Collected Essays of Richard S. Rodney*, 75.

48 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 52-3.

taxes for defense for which citizens of Pennsylvania were liable.[49] This galled the Pennsylvania Assembly for two reasons, the first being that many members were Quakers, and therefore pacifists who did not believe in spending money on military affairs. The second was that a considerable amount of the taxes for defense went to stations along the Delaware River for the protection of the Lower Counties.

Another division between Pennsylvania and Delaware arose a few years prior to the Revolution, when certain parties in Philadelphia entertained the idea of exchanging their proprietary governor for a royal one. In Pennsylvania, this was a fierce debate, with the Presbyterians in particular in favor of retaining the proprietary government. The Presbyterians, most of whom had come to America to escape British oppression, thought that a royal governor would bring an established church and tithes to Pennsylvania.[50] The anti-proprietary group, headed by Benjamin Franklin, believed that Pennsylvania would benefit from the change, as a proprietor's primary concern was to make money off his colonies, a scheme which did not always put the actual needs of the people of the colonies first. Placing control of Pennsylvania and Delaware directly into the King's hands would eliminate the middle man.

Delawareans, on the other hand, were contented with their proprietary governor. Religious denominations did not play a factor in this decision; it was simply that the little colony was thriving under the benign neglect of the Penn rule. Delaware's laws did not

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49 Scott, *A Gentleman as Well as a Whig*, 25.

50 Milton E. Flower, *John Dickinson, Conservative Revolutionary* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1983), 76-7.

have to be approved in London and their government underwent very little scrutiny by anyone outside of Delaware. A change in governors could only bring unwanted attention and perhaps unwanted changes to the colony of Delaware. Consequently, the anti-proprietary faction never found much support in Delaware, much to the chagrin of Mr. Franklin and other like-minded Pennsylvanians. And perhaps unsurprisingly, it was John Dickinson, a man who had been raised in Kent County, who was one of the strongest opponents of the anti-proprietary party in Philadelphia.[51]

Delaware's laws were different from Pennsylvania's, as was the structure of its political body. Delaware had a unicameral Assembly consisting of eighteen men from three counties while Pennsylvania had a bicameral Assembly and many more factions to deal with. The Quakers, although they held political influence in Delaware, were nowhere near as powerful a faction as they were in Pennsylvania. Delaware was pleased with its proprietary government while many Pennsylvanians disliked it. And while many people traveled to Philadelphia, few travelers ever came to Delaware, especially to the relatively isolated regions of Kent and Sussex. For all of these reasons, Ryerson's conclusions on the Pennsylvania committees do not hold true for Delaware. The careful historian must consider the policies followed by Delaware during the Revolution separately from those of Pennsylvania.

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51 Flower, *John Dickinson*, 35-6.

Delaware Politics: A Background

Caesar Rodney held his first political office in 1755 at the age of twenty-seven when he became high sheriff of Kent County.[52] By the time of the Revolution, he was a seasoned politician, and it would be useful to relate some facts about the political system in which he and Thomas operated before proceeding further. The most important political body in Delaware was the unicameral Assembly which consisted of eighteen men, six from each of the three counties. In structure, the Assembly of 1774 was essentially unchanged from the Assembly of Caesar and Thomas' grandfather that first convened in 1704 after separating from Pennsylvania. Assemblymen were elected yearly, in October, but there was no limit as to how many years an Assemblyman could serve. In addition to the Assemblymen, a sheriff and a coroner were also elected in each county every year. The sheriff's post was particularly sought after because it was a potentially lucrative post that wielded a great deal of local influence, such as running the elections and selecting the grand jurors for courts. Because of the office's appeal, its term of service was limited to three years, after which a candidate had to wait another three years before he could submit his name for election again.[53] The sheriff also selected justices for the levy courts, a matter which in later years became a point of contention, for it meant that a sheriff with certain party affiliations could fill the courts with justices of similar opinions, thereby making it impossible for members of opposing viewpoints to

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52 Frank, *Caesar Rodney, Patriot*, 8.

53 Munroe, *Colonial Delaware*, 232.

obtain a fair hearing.[54] Quite often, the justices of the courts also sat on the Assembly.

The power of the Assembly within Delaware surpassed even the control of the proprietary governor who came to the city of New Castle once or twice a year. And as no Delaware laws were ever submitted to the Crown, even the king had less power in Delaware than the Assembly. [55] The Assemblymen generally sat no more than twice a year, in October, immediately following the elections, and again in May or June. The first order of business was to elect a Speaker for the year. The Speaker was the highest authority in the Lower Counties although he often did little more than preside over and guide the Assembly sessions. The Speaker did not vote on any issues unless his vote was necessary to break a deadlock. Caesar Rodney served as Speaker in 1770, then again from 1773 to1776.[56] The sessions rarely lasted more than a month, and prior to the disturbance with Great Britain, the Assembly's concerns were mostly with mending roads, damming streams, erecting hospitals and other social works, and hearing petitions from debtors. The spring sessions tended to be even shorter than the fall sessions.

Elections were riotous affairs, often accompanied with free liquor and scenes of carousing. Voters had to be at least twenty-one years of age and to have resided in the Lower Counties for at least two years. They either had to own at least fifty acres of land,

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54 Munroe, *Colonial Delaware*, 233-4.

55 Claudia L. Bushman, Harold B. Hancock, and Elizabeth Moyne Homsey, ed., *Proceedings of the Assembly of the Lower Counties on Delaware 1770-1776, of the Constitutional Convention of 1776, and of the House of Assembly of the Delaware State 1776-1781* (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1986), 14.

56 Ibid., 555-7.

at least twelve of which had to be cleared for farming, or to possess property equivalent to forty pounds sterling or more. For those who met these qualifications, voting was mandatory, a fine being imposed on those who failed to do so.[57] The law did not specifically exclude women or people of color. It is highly likely that several women and free blacks met these qualifications, but unfortunately election records for colonial Delaware are virtually nonexistent and no one has found any evidence to indicate whether anyone other than white males were allowed to vote.

Prior to 1775, there were only two political parties in Delaware: the Court party and the Country party. Members of the Court party tended to be Anglican or Quaker and tended to the conservative. The Country party attracted Presbyterians and more radical elements. The Presbyterians, and therefore the Country party, would be identified with American independence as early as 1769. The Country party traditionally had more success in New Castle County, which was heavily dominated by Presbyterians.[58] The counties of Kent and Sussex commonly voted for the moderate Anglican Court party. The party lines should not be taken too seriously, however, as occasionally a man would run on both tickets. Historian John A. Munroe, perhaps a trifle factitiously, remarked: "The chief difference between them [was] that one group was in office and the other group out of office."[59] There was a certain sameness to the men who held office. Most were wealthy landowners, members of the colonial elite, who had slaves to run their

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57 Scott, *A Gentleman as Well as a Whig*, 23.

58 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 32-3.

59 Munroe, *Colonial Delaware*, 232.

farms and the leisure to devote their hours to concerns other than the day-to-day running of their domestic affairs. Once elected, if a man proved competent, he was likely to remain in power for life. Eight men, one of whom was Caesar Rodney, were elected to the Assembly every year from 1762 to1770. Other men, like Edward Fisher, vanished after a single year of service.[60] Before the trouble with Britain began, the Assembly was mostly concerned with draining swamps, mending roads, building orphanages and hospitals, and considering petitions for clemency.

Caesar Rodney, an Anglican, was a member of the Court party until the Revolution changed the system. Most likely his ties with the Ridgely family initially smoothed his entry into politics, as getting into power was more a matter of wealth and connections than ability. Nicholas Ridgely was Caesar's guardian, and although he never held a seat on the Assembly himself, his son Charles Ridgely was a noted Kent County politician, perhaps even more influential than Caesar Rodney. Nicholas Ridgely was apparently very fond of Caesar, and probably influenced his early political decisions.[61] When Caesar later abandoned the Court party for a more radical path, he eschewed his former friends and family as well as his political party.

Not all votes in the Assembly were put on record, but those that were show that divisions often occurred along county lines.[62] This balance of three counties is critical to understanding how the political mechanism worked in Delaware in the years preceding

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60 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 572.

61 Ridgely, *What Them Befell*, xx-xxi.

62 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 30.

the Revolution. For example, in the spring of 1770, a bill to build a hospital in Kent County was defeated by a lack of support from the Assemblymen from New Castle and Sussex who did not wish to spend money that would benefit only Kent County and not their own. Caesar Rodney, then Speaker, noted sadly: "The Kent seats do not appear quite so formidable now as I have known them."[63] If the Assemblymen from two of the counties agreed upon an issue and the third did not, the Assemblymen from the dissenting county were faced with the choice of capitulating or walking out of the Assembly in protest. If all the Assemblymen from one county were absent, no business could be conducted, so it was possible for one county to hold the entire Assembly hostage by simply refusing to show up for the appointed meetings. Until the Revolution, no issue proved so divisive that any of the counties took the radical step of walking out of the Assembly. In the early 1770s, a new Presbyterian bloc began to emerge in the Assembly consisting of Thomas McKean and John McKinly of New Castle County and William Killen and John Haslet of Kent County.[64] They voted together on Wednesday, October 23 1773, then again on October 27 of the same year on issues concerning the election of judges to the levy courts.[65] The Presbyterians were generally in favor of the more radical changes to Delaware's government, and although their block of McKean, McKinly, Killen and Haslet was often outvoted, their voice gained strength. The

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63 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 35-6.

64 Munroe, *Colonial Delaware*, 243.

65 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 126-134 *passim*.

Presbyterians were the Rodney brothers' strongest allies during the Revolution.[66]

Prior to 1774, the people of the Lower Counties tended to be provincial in their outlook.[67] They knew precious little of life in other regions in North America and regarded their tiny colony as their country.[68] In this they had much in common with the people of the other twelve colonies who, until the trouble with Great Britain, rarely looked beyond the boundaries of their own lands. The only other colonies most men of the Lower Counties were likely to have visited were Maryland, which had close ties to Sussex County, and Pennsylvania. It took an action of Great Britain's, the Stamp Act, to open the eyes of men like Caesar Rodney to a larger world.

The Stamp Act met with no more favorable a reaction in Delaware than it did anywhere else in America; what makes it intriguing is how uniform the response was. A special Assembly was convened in the Lower Counties, which signed letters nominating one delegate from each of the three counties to attend the Stamp Act Congress. The letters from Kent and Sussex were virtually identical in wording, and although the New Castle letter took a stronger stance, it nominated the same three delegates.[69] One of these, Joseph Kollock of Sussex did not attend, owing to age or illness. Sussex County would be denied a voice in Revolutionary politics more than once. The other two men were

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66 Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney*, 16.

67 Munroe, "The Philadelawareans," 128.

68 Ward, *The Delaware Continentals*, 490-1.

69 Munroe, *Colonial Delaware*, 133.

Thomas McKean, a prominent lawyer from New Castle, and Caesar Rodney of Kent.

The Stamp Act Congress of 1765, which took place in New York, was a momentous event in the life of Caesar Rodney, who for the first time traveled a significant distance away from his home colony and exchanged perspectives with men who did not have firm ties with Delaware soil. The importance of this Congress to Caesar's life may be measured in part by the fact that when the Delaware Assembly formed a new government in 1776, Delaware's copy of the journal of the Stamp Act Congress found its way into Caesar Rodney's hands. He kept it with his personal papers and even inscribed his name on the second page. When Caesar died in 1784, he willed his papers to Thomas, who carefully preserved them.[70] Historians should feel beholden to the Rodneys' habit of saving documents, for other than the Rodney Journal, few records of the Stamp Act Congress exist.

The Stamp Act Congress marked a turning point in the life and political outlook of Caesar Rodney as well as that of other Delawareans. Thomas McKean was a fiery Scots-Irish Presbyterian who always spoke on behalf of the radical cause. His zealous support of the actions of the Stamp Act Congress are not surprising. Caesar Rodney's reactions are more revealing. In a letter to his brother Thomas dated October 20, 1765, he described the congress as "an assembly of the greatest ability I ever yet saw." Caesar was not yet anything resembling a radical; he simply perceived the people of America as

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70 C. A. Weslager, *The Stamp Act Congress* (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1976),170.

freeborn Englishmen and was concerned with retaining the rights he believed Americans were owed by the British Constitution.[71] Yet according to John Adams, both Rodney and McKean supported the Whig James Otis for chairmanship of the Stamp Act Congress rather than the moderate Timothy Ruggles. They lost out, but later, when Ruggles refused to sign the completed petition, the enraged McKean issued him a challenge that went unmet.[72] Rodney, less belligerent, contented himself with a few jibes at Ruggles's expense.[73]

Thomas, who was only twenty-one at the time of the Stamp Act Congress, did not yet display any of the enthusiasm for the patriotic cause that characterized him during the Revolution. He probably did not appreciate the significance of the Stamp Act Congress's actions, although he was sufficiently impressed to later recall the color of the cloak Caesar wore to the Stamp Act Congress.[74] Undoubtedly Caesar, upon his return to Delaware, told his brother many details about the Stamp Act Congress which have since been lost to time. If Thomas was sparked by a desire to emulate his brother, he did not act upon it until 1769, when he ran, somewhat unenthusiastically, for high sheriff.[75] With the Stamp Acts repealed and outrage towards Great Britain receding in the Lower

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71 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 59.

72 Munroe, *Colonial Delaware*, 74-5.

73 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 7.

74 Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney*, 52. For the curious, Caesar's cloak was blue with red lining.

75 Ibid., 6. According to Thomas, he won the election, but allowed his running-mate James Coldwell to be made sheriff instead.

Counties, local politics were probably not dramatic enough to interest Thomas. Caesar's interest in affairs outside Delaware appeared to wane as well, and his political career, although successful, was conservative, as he voted against most of the radical ideas for change to Delaware's political system that were proposed prior to 1774, including a suggestion that members of the levy courts be elected by the people rather than by the sheriff.[76] To all outward appearances, Caesar Rodney's political stance was no different than those of his friend Charles Ridgely. However, it was evident by 1773 that Caesar's attendance at the Stamp Act Congress had moved him off the moderate course and onto the path of a patriot.

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76 Hazel D. Brittingham, *John Clowes Jr., 1730-1790 Broadkill Patriot, The Man, His Family, The Times* (Wilmington: Delaware Heritage Press, 1989), 27-35.

1774

There is only one entry for the year 1773 in George Ryden's collection *Letters to and From Caesar Rodney 1756-1784*, and that is a letter dated October 25, written by Caesar and addressed to the House of Burgesses in Virginia.[77] The letter itself is brief and formal and gives no clue as to how Caesar himself felt about the recent political developments. In fact, prior to 1774, and the business with the Stamp Act Congress aside, there is very little evidence in the papers of either Caesar or Thomas that indicates a great interest in the affairs with Great Britain let alone an indication on which side of the issues they stood. But judging by their actions from 1774 onwards, both brothers were already firm proponents of the American cause.

The resolves of the House of Burgesses called for the organization of Committees of Correspondence throughout the colonies, which could be used to communicate difficulties with Great Britain. This was in response to the Boston Tea Party and the Coercive Acts, which included the closing of the Boston port. As Speaker of the Assembly, Caesar was writing to inform the Virginian House that the Lower Counties had complied with the resolves and formed a Committee of Correspondence on October 23. Caesar was a member of this body, as were Thomas McKean, George Read, John McKinly, and Thomas Robinson. Committees of Correspondence were also formed for each of the three counties, which were separate and distinct from the colony-wide Committee of Correspondence. Both Caesar and Thomas Rodney were on the Kent

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77 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 38.

County Committee of Correspondence, convened August 1, 1774, along with Charles Ridgely, John Haslet, William Killen, John Clarke, and seven others, a blending of Whigs, moderates, and loyalists – although these distinctions had not yet crystallized in 1774.[78]

In the Lower Counties, people of New Castle County assembled before the courthouse in the city of New Castle on June 29 to discuss the situation with Britain. The New Castle Committee of Correspondence, which had already been formed, led the debate. Anglican George Read headed the Committee, although it consisted mostly of Whig-leaning Presbyterians. The June 29 gathering denounced most of the acts of Britain since 1764, citing specifically the closing of Boston's port. Caesar Rodney, who was from Kent, was not present at the New Castle meeting, but George Read sent him a letter on July 11 describing what had taken place and requesting that Caesar write to the members of the Assembly to inform them of a meeting to choose delegates for the first Continental Congress.[79] It was, of course, Caesar's duty as Speaker of the Assembly to inform the Assemblymen of the meeting, but one line bears quoting. The senders are "convinced of your [Caesar's] zeal for American liberty," which may have been flowered words used to urge Caesar to act swiftly. Caesar's actions following the Committee's letter suggests that their words were not mere sugary adornment, however. By this early date, Caesar Rodney was already an ardent patriot.

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78 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 143.

79 Committee of New Castle, New Castle, to Caesar Rodney, Dover, 11 July 1774, in the hand of George Read, Caesar Rodney Collection, Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington.

The people of New Castle, who tended to be more radical than people from Kent or Sussex counties, acted too quickly for the comfort of the rest of the colony and caused a great affront which could have damaged the cause of independence in Delaware. The New Castle Committee of Correspondence set the date of the meeting to choose congressional delegates as August 1 and chose the city of New Castle for the location without consulting anyone from the other counties beforehand. In his reply to the New Castle Committee, dated July 15, 1774, Caesar wrote that while he highly approved of holding a meeting to select delegates, he also thought that New Castle's fixing the place and time before either of the other counties had held their assemblies would offend "some who would wish to have a hand in every good work, and thereby injure the cause."[80] Caesar's phraseology reveals not only his political savvy but also his patriotic stance; a moderate would not be so concerned about "injuring the cause."

Caesar was only too correct in his estimation of Kent and Sussex's reaction to New Castle's impetuousness. Kent was irritated, but agreed to New Castle's decisions. The people of Sussex County, however, were so aggravated by New Castle County's failure to consult them that they considered ignoring the August 1 meeting in New Castle and picking their own delegates to Congress. Thomas McKean had to travel to Lewes and plead with the people congregated at the court house before Sussex would agree to the measures adopted by Kent and New Castle. When the Assembly was held on August 1, the three men chosen to represent the Lower Counties in Congress were Caesar Rodney from Kent and Thomas McKean and George Read from New Castle. There were no

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80 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 40-1.

delegates from Sussex chosen, although Thomas Robinson later claimed he was elected but declined to serve.[81] The Assembly's instructions to the delegates required them to seek reconciliation with Great Britain on one hand but agree to all the resolves of Congress and the policies of the other colonies on the other.[82] Its vacillating tone matched the ambiguous stance of Delaware in 1774.

When Caesar Rodney departed for Congress, he officially left his brother Thomas in charge of his business affairs. Tacitly, however, Thomas had more on his hands than simply managing Caesar's farms. With Caesar in Philadelphia and away from local politics, Thomas became Caesar's eyes and ears in Kent County. Thomas, perhaps not surprisingly, developed political ambitions of his own. In addition to his seat on the Kent County Committee of Correspondence, Thomas was involved in the Kent County Committee of Inspection, although exactly what his position was on the committee is unclear until 1775.[83] However, as shall be detailed later, the Committees of Inspection, particularly the one in Kent County, were the most responsible for setting up the events that led to Separation Day and Delaware's supporting of Lee's resolution on independence in 1776.

The Committees of Inspection and Observation had the power to fine and publicly shame members of society who spoke out against Congress. They were probably organized around the same time as the Committees of Correspondence for each county.

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81 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 18.

82 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 43-4.

83 Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney*, 11.

Information regarding the formation of the Committees of Inspection is scarce, but the members seem to have been drawn from members of the Committees of Correspondence.[84] Those serving on the Delaware Committees of Inspection tended to be the most ardent patriots; some historians have speculated that members were elected in small, secret meetings attended only by the most zealous of patriots.[85] If the moderates had an opportunity to attend these meetings and refused to do so on principle, it represented a tactical mistake on their part, for the Committees of Inspection played a pivotal role in creating the decisive year of 1776. The first few cases over which the Kent Committee of Inspection presided were relatively simple affairs, such as that of Alexander Porter who had merely kept his workers in the field on a fast day for fear his wheat would spoil.[86] Porter publically apologized and was never again suspected of disloyalty, but more challenging cases would arise in 1775.

Caesar Rodney had not been in Philadelphia long when the divisive issue of the Suffolk Resolves arose. It was September 16, 1774 when news of the Suffolk Resolves reached Congress from Massachusetts. While the Suffolk Resolves acknowledged George III as their rightful sovereign, they also called for the arming of a militia against further British depredations. They declared the Coercive Acts unconstitutional and decreed that no courts would sit nor any taxes be paid until the acts were rescinded.[87] The

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84 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 22.

85 Munroe, *Colonial Delaware*, 248.

86 Hancock, *The Loyalist of Revolutionary Delaware*, 20.

87 Scott, *A Gentleman as Well as a Whig*, 74.

Suffolk Resolves, although respectfully worded, were in essence inflammatory, and supporting them must have been a difficult task for the more moderate members of Congress. That Caesar Rodney showed no hesitation in accepting them, never questioned their necessity in his correspondence, is another measure of how firmly he stood on the patriot side; men like Thomas Robinson of Sussex were dismayed by the news of the Suffolk Resolves. Thomas Robinson thought that in particular that the arming of a colonial militia was treasonous.[88] Many other people in Delaware shared Robinson's viewpoint, and the old Court and Country parties in Kent County Delaware began to splinter as the Country party came to be seen as the people who approved of the Suffolk Resolves and the Court party represented those who believed the resolves went too far in defying Britain.[89] Neither the Court nor the Country party was prepared for the division occasioned by the Suffolk Resolves, so Thomas Rodney took the opportunity to create a third party. As chance would have it, the Suffolk Resolves arrived just in time to coincide with the preliminaries for the Assembly election in Delaware.

Even before the Suffolk Resolves, trouble was brewing in the Lower Counties due in large part to a false rumor that a British warship had fired upon Boston.[90] Thomas sent Caesar a letter on September 11, 1774, that reveal the political atmosphere in Kent:

> "Our vicars (as the doctor calls them) seem put to silence by. . . the hostile invasion of Boston, perhaps judging it impolitic longer to oppose the popular opinion against such unheard of oppression –

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88 Scott, *A Gentleman as Well as a Whig*, 91.

89 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 21.

90 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 49.

> However before this, their junto of domestic police, had formed the attempt to exclude you from their political favor and ticket, but were defeated in this by your warm friends in their council. . . However your good friend Dr. R– has laid a trap with his old machine L–mn which he no doubt thinks may gain his purpose of throwing you off the assembly."[91]

This letter bears closer inspection. If Thomas's estimation of the situation was correct, people in the Lower Counties were speaking out against Congress almost before it had time to sit, certainly before it had accomplished any objectives of note. The "vicars" quoted in the letter was a reference to Anglicans, who were much more likely to be moderates or even Tories than Presbyterians. (Ironically, the Rodney brothers were Anglicans.) The "doctor" referred to was most likely Dr. James Tilton, a Presbyterian, a zealot for the American cause, and a close friends of the Rodneys. He served on the Committee of Correspondence for Kent and it is very likely he served on the Committee of Inspection and Observation as well. Later, he served in the First Delaware Regiment as a surgeon.[92]

More intriguing is Thomas's belief that some Kent politicians were working towards having Caesar thrown out of the Assembly. At this time, Caesar was still a member of the Court party. Other men on his ticket, such as Charles Ridgely, the "Dr. R" of Thomas's letter, would later be suspected as Tories. The Country ticket was headed by William Killen, and John Haslet was also a candidate on this ticket. Both these men were

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91 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 46-7.

92 Ward, *The Delaware Continentals*, 6.

Presbyterians and also friends of Caesar.[93] Perhaps Thomas was merely being paranoid – Thomas never trusted the outcome of elections, particularly when they went against his party, to the point where he spent hours devising a system for what he thought would be a faultless election process.[94] However, it is equally likely that Thomas Rodney and James Tilton were deliberately attempting to ruin Charles Ridgely's reputation or at least create a rift between Caesar and Ridgely. Caesar's respone favors the latter interpretation, as he devoted only two lines in response to Thomas's worries in a reply he wrote on September 17: "Your [Thomas's] account of politics in Kent. . . places them in the state I expected they would be–however do no doubt but a great majority of the people will show such a firm attachment to the cause. . . as will defeat their little low ungrateful schemes."[95] Caesar's lack of concern indicates that while he knew some people in Kent did resent Congress, he believed Thomas was exaggerating the situation. In the last line of this letter, Caesar also mentioned that he had a friendly visit Vincent Loockerman, the "old machine" of Charles Ridgely's, the man that Thomas accused of scheming to get Caesar thrown out of the Assembly. Caesar was not yet ready to abandon his old party nor alienate his old allies.

A missing letter, written some time between September 11 and September 20, from Thomas to Caesar, contained more references to Kent County politics. Thomas

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93 Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney*, 9.

94 Thomas Rodney, "A Proposition on Delaware Elections," Thomas Rodney's journal 1776-1792, Thomas Rodney Collection, Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington.

95 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 49.

referred to it in his letter of September 20, writing that political matters in Kent had changed since last he wrote to Caesar. Until the missing letter is discovered, if it ever is, whatever Thomas was initially planning will remain unknown. But in his September 20 letter to Caesar, Thomas revealed his scheme to create a third party to run for election to the Assembly.

Dr. Charles Ridgely was, apart from Caesar Rodney, the most prominent politician in Kent County and an old friend of Caesar. Thomas Rodney likely viewed him as the man who stood in the way of the Whig party's success in Kent, for Ridgely was a moderate, although Thomas and other Whigs preferred to label him a Tory. In September, Thomas had a conversation with John Cook, a member of the Court party and a friend to Ridgely, who was running for the office of sheriff that year. Thomas told Cook that "the doctor's [Charles Ridgely's] conduct in public measures had deprived him of my assistance."[96] Thomas, at this point in time, held no political office except for his seat on the Committee of Correspondence, of which Ridgely was also a member. It is not even certain that he was sitting on the Committee of Inspection as of yet, and he was looking to win a seat on the Assembly for the first time in his life. Charles Ridgely, in contrast, was a seasoned and well-respected man of the community who had won a seat on the Assembly for four years in a row and could not have possibly stood in need of Thomas's aid.[97] Far more probable is that Ridgley's moderate stance exasperated Thomas during business conducted by the Committee of Correspondence. Whatever Thomas's

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96 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 50-2.

97 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 555-6.

true reasons, Cook was dismayed by his plan, for he "pressed my [Thomas's] carrying the doctor, and said he apprehended if I did not that he would declare off." But Thomas refused to change his decision, and evidently managed to convince Vincent Loockerman to side with his party against Ridgley, for Loockerman's name appears on Thomas's middle ticket.

For the first time in Caesar's political career, friction developed between him and the Court party. John Cook believed that Charles Ridgely would still carry Caesar on the Court party ticket, but on September 22, Thomas sent an express letter to Caesar informing him that the third ticket scheme was causing a great deal of commotion in Kent County. Thomas warned Caesar that members of the Court party in Kent wished to know if Caesar was at the bottom of the middle ticket scheme. Thomas also, perhaps indulging in another bout of paranoia, thought that Ridgely's friends might try to get something in Caesar's writing that they could turn to his disadvantage, and cautioned Caesar to be careful in what he wrote, as if the impetuous Thomas thought he had earned the right to caution his prudent elder brother.[98]

Once again, Caesar's response was phlegmatic, indicating that he believed his brother was overreacting. His letter of September 24, with the elections in the Lower Counties looming very close, contained a line worth further inspection. Caesar often dined in Philadelphia with Richard Penn, the brother of John Penn, the proprietary governor. Caesar described Richard Penn, who always treated the delegates with much courtesy, as "a great friend to the cause of liberty," and claimed that John Penn would

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98 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 51-2.

have liked to act in a similar fashion, were it not for his office. "*By this you may see that some people with you are mistaken in their politics*," Caesar lectured Thomas, "*and you may also take for granted everybody here are not well pleased with the coalition of the two brothers.*"[99] [emphasis mine.]

In this revealing statement, Caesar did not deny that "the coalition of the two brothers," himself and Thomas, existed. He did not attempt to disassociate himself from Thomas, nor did he advise his younger brother to stay out of politics. All Caesar did was warning Thomas that the Lower Counties were not yet ready to support his unabashedly Whig middle ticket. Some more moderate members of the Kent assembly delegate who disapproved of Caesar's radical stance were undoubtedly dismayed to discover that in Thomas, Caesar had a willing deputy who could carry on his political business even when he himself was not present. Perhaps some looked further into the future and envisioned the trouble that could be raised by Thomas's zealotry coupled to Caesar's respectability and experience. Together, the brothers could accomplish what would be impossible separately. Small wonder some persons were not pleased with "the coalition of the two brothers."

Charles Ridgely, upon hearing of Thomas's machinations, was furious, and instantly assumed that Caesar was the true culprit behind the middle ticket scheme, despite Thomas's assurances to the contrary. Not trusting Thomas's protestations of his elder brother's innocence, Ridgely threatened to send an express to Philadelphia to obtain the truth from Caesar. Again according to Thomas, in a September 28 letter,

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99 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 52.

Ridgley had been making a deal with Vincent Loockerman to have Caesar taken off the Court ticket some three weeks before, but was prevented by some of Caesar's friends.[100] It is difficult to know how much credence to lend to Thomas's views, but certainly a coolness was arising between Caesar and Charles Ridgely, helped in large part through Thomas's actions.

Caesar was correct when he told Thomas that Kent was not ready to support an entirely Whig ticket. Thomas ended his September 28 letter with assurances of how well his middle ticket was being received, but in actuality, it was thoroughly defeated in October. Caesar did retain his seat on the Assembly, but on the Court ticket, alongside Charles Ridgely. William Killen and John Haslet, stout Whigs both and members of Thomas's middle ticket, lost the seats which they had held in 1774 – Killen had been on the Assembly for five straight years, Haslet three. The two new seats in the Kent section of the Assembly went to a pair of conservatives: Jacob Stout and Robert Holliday.[101]

The experience with Thomas's middle ticket and other political wrangling disgusted Charles Ridgely. In October he wrote a letter to his friend, Charles Inglis, the Anglican rector who had married the woman Caesar loved. In it, Ridgely stated that he had lost all faith in Congress, although he had high hopes of it. But it had fallen "under the Presbyterian and independent influence."[102] The only delegate in Congress that

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100 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 53-4.

101 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 557.

102 Leon de Valinger, Jr. and Virginia E. Shaw, ed., *A Calendar of Ridgely Family Letters 1742-1899, Volume 1* (Dover, Delaware: Published privately by some descendants of the Ridgely family for the Public Archives Commission, 1948), 91.

Ridgely knew personally was Caesar Rodney, and Ridgely's remark about "independent influence" most certainly related to him. After 1774, relations between the Court party, represented by Charles Ridgely, and Caesar Rodney, would be strained. Caesar could no longer rely on the support of Kent County Anglicans. Thanks to Thomas, Caesar had only two choices: either moderate his stance on independence or ally himself with a new political party.

1775

In February, 1775, the Restraining Acts, which declared Massachusetts to be in rebellion, were passed. The British force in Boston was increased, and the North Atlantic fisheries were closed to ships from New England. In March, these decrees were expanded to include New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina with specific mention being made of the ports of the Lower Counties.[103] Apparently someone in the British Parliament had seen a letter that William Killen, writing on behalf of the Kent Committee of Correspondence, had sent to the Committee of Correspondence in Philadelphia, a letter that, as Thomas Rodney expressed it, "breathed tar and feathers."[104] The Delaware Assembly refused to change the orders to its delegates, however, even in light of the new oppression from Britain. The delegates were still commanded not to take any action that might offend the king.[105]

The patriots of Kent County, in contrast, took advantage of the indignation the Restraining Acts roused to root out or silence the Tories in their midst. For the first time, the general public opinion in Kent appears to have swung against the British, a great boon to the patriots. In 1775, it was not uncommon for suspected loyalists to be pelted with eggs and rotten fruit or threatened with tar and feathers.[106] Whenever anyone dared

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103 Scharf, *History of Delaware*, *Vol. I*, 221.

104 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 54-5.

105 Ibid., 55-6.

106 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 26-7.

to voice a conservative viewpoint, either the Committee of Inspection or the county Committee of Correspondence would fall upon the offender like a hail of lead. Sometimes a man did not even need to be guilty for the Committees to mar his political career. The most important event in the saga of the Kent County Committee for Inspection began in early 1775 and played out during the entire year.

It began when Quaker Robert Holliday, who was a member of the Assembly for Kent County and the Kent Committee of Correspondence, wrote a letter to the Philadelphia Committee of Correspondence, in which he delineated what he thought to be the true political atmosphere in Kent County. "I believe if the King's standard were now erected, nine out ten would repair to it."[107] Holliday later claimed that he never intended his missive for public viewing, but it was printed anonymously in Philadelphia in Humphrey's Ledger, No. 3.[108] The Philadelphia Committee of Correspondence quickly complained of the letter to its sister committee in Kent, addressing their letter to Caesar Rodney and William Killen. Incensed by the anti-independent sentiments it voiced, some members of the Kent committee began a search for the author of the anonymous letter. Then, at some unrecorded point in the investigation, an unnamed Presbyterian accused Charles Ridgely of penning it.[109]

Ridgely's moderate politics caused him to fall into disfavor in the newly pro-

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107 Harold B. Hancock, ed., "The Kent County Loyalists, Part II: Documents," *Delaware History*, Vol.6, No. 2 (1954): 105-6.

108 Ibid., 114-5.

109 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 21.

independence atmosphere of Kent County. He was perhaps already suspected of being the author of the Holliday letter in February, when a Thomas Tilton of Kent (no relation to James) wrote to him on the 28th. Tilton feared that freedom of the press would be suppressed because of Holliday's letter. Delaware had no newspapers or printing press of its own at the time, and it is unlikely that Charles Ridgely could have accomplished much one way or the other, but Thomas Tilton begged him to speak up for freedom of the press at the next meeting of the Kent County Committee of Correspondence.[110] If Ridgely did speak out in favor of freedom of the press at the next meeting, it is very likely that Whigs such as Thomas Rodney, William Killen, and Thomas Haslet were willing to think the worst of him – or at least take advantage of the opportunity to do so. The furor over Holliday's letter refused to recede; by May, moderates and Tories were concerned enough about the accusations against Ridgely that John Clark, a fellow member of the Court ticket, pleaded with the Committees in favor of Ridgely's innocence.[111] There is no record of anyone from the Whig party making any attempt to defend Ridgely. It is much more likely that the Kent Whigs used the outrage over Holliday's letter to discredit Ridgely and ruin his political career.

Finally, Robert Holliday wrote an apology to the Committee on May 2, revealing himself as the author. Holliday was a member of the Court party and currently an assemblyman alongside Ridgely so it is possible that he stepped forward to protect the reputation of his friend. The Committee still professed itself unsatisfied, and Holliday

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110 De Valinger and Shaw, ed., *A Calender of Ridgely Family Letters*, 91-2.

111 Ibid., 92.

was forced to make a longer, written confession a week later.[112] Had public indignation over the Restraining Acts been less powerful, this would have been the end of the matter, but Charles Ridgely's loyalties remained in question. Instead of subsiding with the affair of the letter, suspicion of Ridgely appeared to increase over 1775. Thomas Rodney, writing at a much later date, accused James Tilton and William Killen for stirring up accusations against Ridgely, but claimed that he, Thomas, defended Ridgely.[113] This is most likely another example of Thomas's reinventing events after the fact, for there is nothing in his letters or papers of 1775 to indicate that he supported Ridgely.

At a meeting of the Kent County Committee of Inspection on August 17, when new members for the Kent County Committee of Correspondence were chosen, the Whigs' efforts to discredit Ridgely were rewarded. The new members were Thomas Rodney, James Tilton, William Killen, John Banning, and Vincent Loockerman; in short, they were almost all members of Thomas's middle ticket, save for Caesar, who was away in Philadelphia, and John Haslet, who was involved in military duties.[114] The new Committee of Correspondence's first meeting was held on September 7. Thomas Rodney was chosen as chairman in place of Charles Ridgely – a fact which probably gave Thomas enormous satisfaction. Thomas Rodney was also appointed captain of the Light Infantry for Kent around this time – Thomas had apparently gained political respect since his failed campaign of 1774. Six days later, on September 12, Thomas Rodney issued a

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112 Hancock, ed., "The Kent County Loyalists," 112-5.

113 Ibid., 119.

114 Ibid., 117.

summons to Charles Ridgely to appear before the committee to answer charges of disloyalty.[115] The elections for the Delaware Assembly were coming up on the first of October. The timing could not have been more auspicious for the Kent County Whigs. In a letter to Caesar dated September 17, Thomas reported that "the resentment of the people has been high against the doctor." Ridgely's name was still connected to Holliday's loyalist letter in the minds of the people, and for this reason, Ridgely, Holliday, and Jacob Stout did not intend to run for election.[116] With the strongest member of the Court party out of the way, there were no obstacles to the Whigs seizing political power.

Thomas Robinson, a wealthy farmer and a member of the Assembly from Sussex, was another powerful conservative politician whom the Whigs attempted to discredit. Robinson was the most influential politician in Sussex County, and the Whigs knew that if they could ruin his reputation, all of the Lower Counties would be under their control Unlike Ridgely, Robinson was a loyalist rather than a moderate and would eventually flee to the British.[117] Robinson was accused by a subcommittee of selling embargoed tea in his shop at the head of the Indian River. He was also overheard speaking out against Congress and the militia. Kent County had first begun calling up militia in May, Sussex County some time later in the year.[118] Robinson apparently told some men who enlisted

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115 De Valinger and Shaw, ed., *A Calender of Ridgely Family Letters*, 92-3.

116 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 64.

117 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 582.

118 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 27-8.

for the militia that they were a "pack of fools, for it was taking up arms against the king." Robinson, however, garnered much more support from his fellows in Sussex County than Charles Ridgely managed in Kent. When the Committee of Correspondence summoned Robinson to appear before them, he defied them, saying: "[he] would not think of coming before them unless he could bring forty or fifty armed men with him." Then he presented a statement signed by five members of the Committee of Inspection for Sussex, which agreed that the accusations against Robinson were without basis.[119]

Thomas Rodney, probably hoping to establish Whig dominance in all three counties of Delaware, involved himself in the Robinson case in December of 1775. Upon hearing that the Committee of Inspection of Sussex had cleared Robinson of all charges, he wrote to William Peery, a Sussex County Whig who had not supported Robinson, requesting that Robinson come before the Council of Safety, which included men from all three counties, to defend his loyalty. Thomas Rodney was, of course, a member of this body himself. He claimed that he was willing to acquit Robinson if satisfied of his innocence. That may or may not have been the truth, but most likely what disturbed Thomas about the Robinson case was that it called into question the legitimacy of the Committees. Robinson was acquitted by the Sussex County Committee of Inspection because some members were more concerned with establishing whether it was right for Robinson to have been charged in the first place than attempting to uncover the truth of

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119 Scott, *A Gentleman as Well as a Whig*, 91.

the accusations.[120] If this precedent held, the Committees, and by extension the Whigs, would lose a great deal of power. In any event, Thomas Rodney was not successful in obtaining a second hearing for Robinson, who would make more trouble for the Whigs in 1776.

With the Court party in disarray, thanks mostly to the Holliday letter and the subsequent actions of the Committees, Thomas Rodney once again introduced his unabashedly Whig middle ticket for the election, consisting of himself and Caesar, John Haslet, Vincent Loockerman, John Banning, and William Killen. This year, Caesar made no objections to Thomas's ticket on the grounds of it being entirely Whig, which indicates that he believed the time had arrived for the Whigs to take a more aggressive stance. As always, however, Thomas managed to go too far in his policies by leaving a gentleman named Philip Barrett, who wished to run for the office of sheriff, off the middle ticket. Barrett was apparently also running on the Court ticket, which was also endorsing Caesar, as it had done for many years past. Nevertheless, Thomas apparently believed that anyone (with the exception of his brother) who ran on the conservative Court ticket was to be viewed as an enemy. Caesar begged to differ. To his mind, Philip Barrett was a honest man, worthy of the position of sheriff, and that worthiness outweighed party affiliation. Caesar did not like some of the rumors he heard concerning the Whigs – that one of them had told Barrett that he had no right to put him, Caesar, on the Court ticket, and that Barrett had only put Caesar on the Court ticket to win votes for

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120 Simon Gratz, ed., *Letters of Thomas Rodney 1770-1810.* (Philadelphia: *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, Vol. XLIII,* 1919), 5-7. Note: this is a bound volume consisting of material previously published in magazine format.

himself by backing a popular candidate. In a letter dated September 27, Caesar reminded his younger brother that "our union is our strength." He feared that the Whigs' strong-arm tactics in Kent would eventually create a backlash against the party, possibly at a crucial juncture, destroying everything they were working towards.[121] Caesar, never in strong health, evidently found the endless politicking in Philadelphia and Kent very wearing, for as he confided in a letter to Betsey, Thomas's wife, "I have undertaken the work and am determined to go through with it if possible though much jaded in the service." This letter is dated September 30 and is marked from New Castle.[122] Apparently Caesar made a brief trip from Philadelphia to attend the Assembly – and possibly to remonstrate personally with his brother, for Philip Barrett did indeed end up on the middle ticket. In October, Thomas's middle ticket, without strong opposition from the Court party or the vacillating Country party, achieved victory. On October 9, 1775, Caesar had occasion to write his brother a letter that contained both congratulations and a warning. "This gives me an opportunity to congratulate you on your safe arrival upon the stage of honor, trouble, expense and abuse," he began – although as seen from earlier letters, Caesar perceived precious little glory in his political service. The letter continued as Caesar warned his younger brother to take care that he should deserve the honor rather than the abuse.[123] Although Caesar was writing in a humorous vein, the warning was

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121 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 64-5.

122 Caesar Rodney, New Castle, to Elizabeth Fisher Rodney, Dover, 30 September 1775, transcript in the hand of Caesar Rodney, Caesar Rodney Collection, Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington.

123 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 65-6.

probably sincerely meant. Caesar disliked alienating people of influence, knowing that, if alienated, they would sooner or later turn against the patriotic cause. Caesar always kept the big picture of events in his mind, something Thomas appeared incapable of doing, preferring short term gains over long term investments.

However, the Committees of Inspection and the Committees of Correspondence, aided by the genuine anger the Restraining Acts had aroused in the populace, had performed their task well. The moderates were swayed to the side of the Whigs – temporarily at least – while the loyalists were too cowed by threat of public retribution to put up a fight. New Castle County had also, predictably, returned a pro-independence ticket. Only Sussex County remained in the control of the moderates, some of whom would become outright loyalists. Indeed, Sussex County's Assemblymen were even more conservative than they had been in 1774, as known Whigs David Hall and John Clowes lost their seats.[124] But the scale of balance had tipped against the Tories; with Kent and New Castle counties both returning Whigs, the patriots could control the Assembly. For at least the first half of 1776, the patriots would be in control of political events in Delaware.

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124 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 557.

"A fortunate result of [Thomas Rodney's] politics which were for the most part ill-conceived and disastrous was that Delaware had a pro-Revolutionary government for the few resounding months in which the proud goal of independence was accepted," asserted William Baskerville Hamilton.[125] Rash though he may have been, Thomas Rodney's machinations set the scene for year 1776, a year that would be both a time of great victories and humiliating defeats for Delaware's Whigs. No man would taste both so deeply as Thomas Rodney's brother Caesar. With indignation over the Restraining Acts and the reality of war with Great Britain settling in, Delaware entered the year 1776 not only as a deeply divided colony, but as a colony whose majority sympathized with the British Crown.[126] The public began to tire of the Whigs' strong-arm tactics. The Delaware Assembly, still vacillating, sent a letter to its delegates to the Second Continental Congress in March urging them to seek reconciliation with Great Britain above all else.[127] Still caught up in Congressional business in Philadelphia, Caesar begged Thomas to choose "persons as will prudently but firmly support the cause" for the Committee of Inspection and Observation in Kent. "This is a critical period and you all well know how much depends on the County Committee," he concluded.[128] This line

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125 Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney*, vii.

126 Munroe, *Colonial Delaware*, 248.

127 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 72-3.

128 Ibid., 70-1.

reveals the depth of Caesar's understanding of local politics. Cut off in Philadelphia, Caesar would occasionally plead ignorance of local matters, but in truth he understood the necessity of keeping people in line via the committees. He did not trust Thomas and his companions to be able to do so without making powerful political adversaries, however.

Throughout the spring of 1776, matters among patriots, moderates, and loyalists became very tense. Thomas Robinson, although he had been cleared of accusations of disloyalty by the Sussex Committee of Correspondence several months earlier, was arrested by the Dover Light Infantry as he made his way from Sussex to New Castle, where the Assembly was gathering. The excuse used for his arrest was a discrepancy between the published journal of the Sussex County proceedings and a letter that had been sent to one of the Kent committees. The Light Infantry asked Robinson if he was going to New Castle to justify himself or to take his seat on the Assembly. When Robinson replied that he was going to sit in the Assembly, the Light Infantry took him into custody. Jacob Moore, who was attorney general for both New Castle and Sussex counties, was arrested as well when he drew his sword in Robinson's defense.[129]

Thomas Rodney was captain of the Light Infantry, and although he apparently was not present at Robinson's arrest, he seemed to have a hand in its making. The ardent Whig James Tilton sent Thomas an account dated March 4. The last paragraph of this letter bears close scrutiny:

"I will thank you for your earliest intelligence of your procedure in

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129 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 26.

> this matter – you will certainly consider this as a fair opportunity of bringing Toryism to a crisis; and if you neglect to insist of a thorough scrutiny of their conduct, remember I will not again be so kind as to quarrel with you about them, but quietly deliver you over to all the Tory devils in Kent and Sussex too to be buffeted at their pleasure."[130]

The phrase "Your earliest intelligence of your procedure" indicated that Thomas Rodney initiated the scheme to arrest Robinson. And if Thomas was indeed interested in "bringing Toryism to a crisis," it belies his protestations of innocence and fair play written later in life. Yet Tilton also wrote that he would not quarrel with Thomas about Tories again, which indicates that at least Thomas was somewhat more moderate than Tilton – not that that is saying a great deal. Tilton was one of the strongest proponents of independence in Kent, a fiery and eccentric Presbyterian who under the name "Timoleon" later published a highly partisan narrative of the events leading up to Revolutionary War in Delaware.[131] Unfortunately for Tilton and Thomas Rodney's schemes, whatever they might have been, Thomas Robinson's friends again came to his aid and he was released on the promise that a committee would investigate his actions – which never actually took place.[132] Sussex County was simply too conservative for the Whigs to gain a foothold there. Most likely all Thomas Rodney and Tilton accomplished was to irritate some influential men in Sussex and perhaps sway a few of the undecided

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130 James Tilton, Dover, to Captain Thomas Rodney, Dover, 4 March 1776, in the hand of James Tilton, Thomas Rodney Collection, Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington.

131 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 43.

132 Ibid., 26.

toward the moderates' side.

The Revolutionary War hero Allan McLane, from Duck Creek in Smyrna, Delaware, later identified June 1776 as the "date of decision," a time when everyone had to choose the side on which to stand. "When the question [of independence] was first agitated in the committees a considerable majority was opposed to the measure," he claimed, "The few Whigs (and very few indeed) became desperate, dreaded the consequence of being captured and treated as rebels. . . ." Reasoned debate once again occasionally gave way to violence. "[The Whigs] attacked the disaffected with tar and feathers, rotten eggs. . . and succeeded in silencing the disaffected and then filling those committees with men determined to be free," McLane concluded.[133] Even Caesar Rodney abandoned his conciliatory language in a letter to Thomas dated May 8 when he wrote: "[those who would] sacrifice the most virtuous cause any body of men ever were engaged in, to gratify themselves with a seat in the house – I detest them and all their wicked designs."[134] Some historians, such as Jane Harrington Scott in *A Gentleman as Well as a Whig*, view Caesar a moderate, but language such as this calls their conclusions into question. Caesar was merely adept at keeping the peace with all political factions to serve his own ends. But Delaware had reached the point where it was no longer possible to appease all sides, and tar and rotten eggs alone could not accomplish much beyond silencing the weakest of opponents. For the Revolution to have succeeded in Delaware, some very careful manipulation had to take place, and once again it started with the

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133 As quoted in: Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 40.

134 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 75-6.

Rodneys. This time Caesar was the instigator instead of Thomas.

On May 17, Congress passed a resolution asking all the colonies to suppress the British elements in their governments and to create new ones under colonial control if necessary. This was the first, crucial step towards actually declaring independence, and as such, was bound to inflame the more conservative members of society. As a delegate, Caesar had time to consider the resolution and what it would mean for the thirteen colonies before it became public knowledge. On the same day the resolution passed, Caesar wrote to his close friend John Haslet, who served in the continental army and was also an Assemblyman of Kent. Caesar's letter of May 17 is so carefully worded that it proves that he must have thought the issues through for several days, considering all potentialities before the resolution even passed. "The reasons, if duly weighed, must enforce the necessity of immediately laying the foundation of a new government. . . ," he wrote. "Nothing will tend more to ensure success in the prosecution of the war; because there is nothing so conductive to vigor, expedition, secrecy, and everything else advantageous in war, as a well regulated government." He continued in this vein for two more paragraphs before concluding: "This continuing to swear allegiance to the power that is cutting our throats. . . is certainly absurd."

Then, having established that he believed that Delaware had no sensible alternative to obeying the resolution of Congress and forming a new government, and hopefully convincing Haslet in the process, Caesar set forth his proposition: "[I shall] turn my thoughts a little to what may (perhaps) be necessary to bring it [the change in government] about." Caesar believed that the Assembly would try to stall the issue by

claiming that they needed to know the opinions of their constituents before taking a vote. Therefore, he suggested to Haslet, it would be best if a few of the right-minded people – that is to say, patriots – circulated petitions to the Delaware Assembly in the resolution's favor. "It would be improper for those who are presently members of the Assembly to be active in the matter," he added, warning Haslet to keep the meeting small so that word of the resolution would remain quiet as long as possible, giving the Whigs an edge. The people he mentioned for the meetings were William Killen, James Tilton, Haslet himself, and of course his brother Thomas, all of whom, except for Tilton, were members of the Assembly.[135] Most likely Caesar wished for the petitions to resemble a spontaneous expression of the populace's true feelings more than he was concerned about the impropriety of assemblymen being involved. Caesar also sent a copy of the resolutions to Thomas on the same day – and it was very unusual for him to send two letters in one day, proof of how strongly he felt on this issue.[136] Two other surviving letters from the month of May from Caesar to Thomas deal with the issue of the resolution at length; it was the most important subject on Caesar's mind in the spring of 1776. He was determined that Delaware follow Congress's resolution, for he saw it as the culmination of all his work for the past two years or more.

Thomas Rodney and John Haslet, and likely other members of the Whig party as well, worked to obtain signatures on the Whig petitions, but the Tories began to circulate

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135 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 79-81.

136 Ibid., 81.

petitions of their own, as Thomas reported to his brother.[137] Thomas reacted as if the Tories were the ones who had began the petitions and the Whigs were the injured party: ". . . the Tories are now making their last effort to subvert the power and influence of the Congress by industriously circulating petitions. . . to induce the Assembly to reject the recommendations of Congress," he wrote to Haslet on June 1, just as if letters written to Caesar did not prove that the Whigs had been doing exactly the same thing for the past two weeks. Thomas went on to beg Haslet to ask the men in his brigade to sign the Whigs' petition, believing that men in the military were more likely to support the change in government. Like Caesar, Thomas believed that getting the resolution passed in Delaware was of supreme urgency: "[not passing the resolution] must dissolve the union and separate us from the other colonies – if this is done you know our fate."[138] Unfortunately, he left no clue for future historians as to what he felt Delaware's "fate" might be.

The Whigs apparently had more trouble garnering support for the resolution than they had expected. Haslet wrote to Caesar Rodney in Philadelphia a few days after the resolution became public, informing Caesar that many people in the counties of Kent and Sussex were opposed to the change of government. He feared that the disaffected were so many that Congress would have to take a hand and disarm Sussex.[139] But Caesar was

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137 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 79.

138 Thomas Rodney, Dover, to Captain ? (presumed Haslet), 1 June, 1776, in the hand of Thomas Rodney, Thomas Rodney Collection, Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington.

139 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 86-7.

more determined to get the resolutions passed than concerned with being fair to the populace. In Pennsylvania, for example, the committees were calling up town meetings and allowing everyone a voice in the matter. "This mode for establishing a government appears to be, and really is very fair," wrote Caesar to Thomas on May 22, "Yet I think they are unwise." A force from Britain was expected to arrive over the summer, and Caesar believed (as he had explained earlier to Haslet) that a stable government was vital for meeting that force. Nor did he support the idea of an election for new Assembly members, as was occurring in some colonies: "In our county [Kent] a new choice could not mend the ticket, but might make it worse – in the other counties there is very little possibility of alteration for the better."[140] Caesar recognized how precarious the Whigs' position was at this time. Congress's resolution was too radical for many people, and the power that the Whigs had accumulated over 1775 was threatening to vanish in the storm of this divisive issue. The Whigs had to act quickly and decisively before popular opinion turned entirely against them.

Thomas and some other members of the Whig party, probably Killen and Haslet, proposed walking out of the Assembly if the resolution was not passed, knowing that if all the assemblymen from Kent walked out, the Assembly would be crippled and incapable of action. But Caesar once again counseled prudence, explaining that if the Assembly could be convinced the people would have no choice but to fall in line, whereas if the Assembly was coerced into accepting the resolution, there would be

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140 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 82-3.

resentment and a potential backlash against the Whigs.[141] Anti-Whig sentiment was already running high in Kent County. "The source of corruption and direction is at Dover," Haslet wrote to Caesar in June, "an hint from thence pervades the lower part of the county in a trice. . . the Congress is sufficiently cursed below."[142]

On June 8, the Committee of Inspection and Observation for Kent County met in Dover to consider both petitions. The petitions submitted by the Tories and the Whigs demonstrated that the two sides took very different views of the situation. The Whigs claimed that Delaware's present government was not sufficient for the crisis at hand while the Tories protested that Congress's resolutions had been misinterpreted, that it was meant to apply only to those colonies whose governments were in disarray. Hundreds of spectators gathered in front of the courthouse where the Committee deliberated for many hours, at last approving Congress's recommendations for a new government, but not independence.[143]

The Tories were predictably outraged by the committee's decision. Thomas Robinson claimed that there were five thousand signatures on the Tory petition and only a mere three hundred names on the Whig one. The Tory petition was thrown into a fire by an overzealous Whig bystander, but five thousand signatures was probably an exaggeration, and judging by what happened next, the crowd was composed of more

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141 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 83-5.

142 Ibid., 88-9.

143 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 42.

Whigs than Tories.[144] Nevertheless, Robinson would blame the destruction of the petition in part for what took place over the next few weeks. Petition-burning was not the only excitement happening in Kent that day. John Haslet had arrived at the courthouse earlier to press disloyalty charges against the elderly, conservative landowner John Clark, who was one of the Kent conservatives who had been unseated by Thomas Rodney's middle ticket. Clark lingered, even though the case was never tried, as the Committee's time was being taken up with the examination of the petitions. Rather imprudently, Clark his conservative friend Thomas White entered into a verbal altercation with Thomas Rodney about the folly of disloyalty to the British Crown. The restless crowd, overhearing his comments, pilloried Clark and threw eggs at him. Haslet refused to interfere. Ironically, Clark was eventually rescued from his humiliation by Thomas Rodney.[145]

The crowd before the Kent County courthouse may have been mostly Whigs, but enough Tories were present to witness the humiliation of John Clark – and to resent it. Nor was Clark prepared to let the insult drop. Wanting revenge, he went to a loyalist friend, one Richard Basset who was in charge of a Light Horse company. Together with another loyalist friend, Thomas White, they planned to attack Dover on June 9. But a member of Basset's own brigade informed on him, and Basset was captured before he could assemble his troops. John Haslet, after his refusal to aid Clark, had been one of their particular targets, and after Thomas Rodney received word of the riot, he sent

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144 John A. Munroe, *History of Delaware* (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 70.

145 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 42-3.

militia to guard Haslet's house for fear an angry mob might burn it down.[146] Clergymen eventually negotiated a truce in Dover, but the disturbance, or the "Black Monday" riots as they came to be called, had already spread to Sussex where there were more loyalists, including the ever-incendiary Thomas Robinson.[147] The backlash against the Whigs that Caesar had feared was beginning, aided, no doubt, by such brutal tactics as the pillorying of Clark.

In the meantime, Caesar Rodney, acting as Speaker of the Assembly, usurped Governor Penn's prerogative and summoned an extralegal meeting of the Assembly on on June 14 to 15 to vote formally on Congress's resolution. It is most unfortunate that no record remains of this session, for the members of the Assembly unexpectedly voted unanimously to sever Delaware's connection both with Great Britain and with the colony of Pennsylvania. The unanimous vote seems to imply that support for independence was widespread, but this cannot be the case. The assemblymen from Kent were all of Thomas Rodney's middle ticket and therefore Whigs, so it is not surprising that they supported the resolution. Likewise, Thomas McKean, John McKinly, and James Latimer of New Castle county could be expected to favor the patriotic cause. But George Read of New Castle voted against Lee's resolution on independence in Congress less than a month later, necessitating Caesar Rodney's overnight ride. None of the men from Sussex were Whigs, indeed many were outright loyalists. Isaac Bradley was one of the men who had supported Thomas Robinson when doubts about his loyalty were raised. Job Ingram

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146 Gratz, ed., *Letters of Thomas Rodney 1770-1810*, 7.

147 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 43-4.

participated in the uprisings that took place in Sussex shortly after the June 15 meeting. Jacob Moore had been arrested on suspicions of disloyalty in March alongside Robinson. James Rench was arrested in 1778 for plotting to free Tories from a nearby prison, and both Thomas Robinson and Boaz Manlove fled to the British side in 1777.[148] Clearly, if these men were present at the June 15 meeting – and there is no record one way or the other – they were somehow convinced to vote against their consciences. Some deductions can be made: it was Caesar Rodney who held the chair, who had called the Assembly, and therefore it was Caesar Rodney who had the power to direct the flow of the meeting. Thomas McKean, perhaps the most zealous Whig of them all, was the primary speaker.[149] Caesar Rodney, as seen from his earlier actions, had been plotting to have the resolution of Congress adopted by Delaware since May 17. It is entirely possible that he and McKean planned the entire Assembly session beforehand in Philadelphia, with or without the aid of George Read. It is also possible that some members of the Assembly took the viewpoint of John Dickinson, who felt that the resolutions of Congress would actually effect a speedy reconciliation with Great Britain.[150] Whatever arguments they used, they were convincing. For the first time, freed of its official ties to Pennsylvania, the little colony was called the Delaware State, although the title would not become official until later in the year. [151]

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148 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 562-583 *passim*.

149 Munroe, *Federalist Delaware*, 82.

150 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 82.

151 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 25.

Another equally important change that occurred at the meeting on June 15 was that new instructions were sent to Delaware's representatives in Congress, allowing them to take what actions they saw as necessary to the benefit of the colonies. There was no longer any talk of seeking reconciliation with Great Britain. This freed the delegates to vote in favor of Lee's resolution, and again it is possible the change in the delegates' orders was masterminded by Rodney and McKean. Delaware, to all appearances, had finally taken a stand.[152] But as later events would prove, the Delaware State's apparently newfound zeal for independence was a facade.

No sooner had the Delaware delegates received their new orders from the Assembly than intelligence reached them of a disturbance in Sussex. The Council of Public Safety in Kent sent a team to investigate. They responded with alarming news. David Hall, Chairman of the Council of Safety, wrote: ". . . There are at least six disaffected to one firm man for America." Lingering resentment over the events of Black Monday coupled with unrest across the border in Maryland raised trouble in Sussex. Loyalists were assembling and there were reports of armed boats on the rivers.[153] It was to quell this insurrection, in his capacity as Brigadier-General of Militia, that Caesar Rodney left Congress some time in mid-to-late June. By the time he arrived in Sussex, the militia had quieted most outward displays of rebellion. Instead of heading back to Congress, the records indicate that Caesar went to his home in Dover to catch up on

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152 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 91-2.

153 Delaware Public Archives, *The Delaware Archives: Military and Naval Records, Volume II* (Wilmington: Mercantile Printing Co., 1912), 1018.

personal business. He may not have realized that the vote on Lee's resolution was scheduled for July 1, and in all likelihood, he thought that George Read would vote in favor of independence – after all, Read had been present at the New Castle meeting of June 15 where the Assembly had unanimously agreed to sever connections with Britain. That Read did not vote for Lee's resolution indicates how tentative was the patriotism of some men of Delaware. George Read's grandson, William Thompson Read, seeking to justify his grandfather, wrote: "Mr. Read, looking. . . to the effect of the Declaration of Independence upon his own colony where dissatisfaction to the Continental Congress was great, and the hostility between the Whigs and the Tories most virulent, could scarcely hope that it would be like that of oil on troubled water."[154] This could be interpreted as meaning that Read believed that keeping the peace in Delaware was more important than securing independence for America, or that Read believed it was too early to take such a step. In this he differed from Caesar Rodney, who believed that if the Whigs did not act soon, the opportunity for independence would be lost. On July 1, an express rider sent by Thomas McKean brought word to Caesar that his vote was needed in Congress to swing Delaware in favor of independence. Caesar arrived in time to cast his vote on July 2. He could not have known that he had just ridden into the history books and henceforth he would always be depicted on horseback.

News of the official separation from Britain reverberated throughout the colonies. In the city of New Castle, joyous Whigs removed the portrait of King George from the

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154 William Thompson Read, *Life and Correspondence of George Read, A Signer of the Declaration of Independence With Notices of Some of His Contemporaries* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Co., 1870), 164.

courthouse wall and ceremoniously burned it on the green.[155] An interesting historical side-note here is that a portrait of Queen Charlotte, possibly the companion piece to the one burned, later turned up in the inventory of Caesar Rodney's estate.[156] But while Whigs rejoiced, the Tories organized. Caesar Rodney, back in Congress, received several letters during the month of July that kept him abreast of events in Delaware, particularly in Kent and Sussex. One was from John Haslet, saying that the Tories of Sussex were ". . . rather irritated than reformed."[157] John Miller, a Presbyterian minister from Dover, warned Caesar: "If a number among us have the same influence in affairs of government they had but a month or two ago when their counter petitions were circulating. . . you may easily judge which way the majority will probably go at the anniversary election." Miller suggested that Caesar make inquiries into the origins of these factions to secure his own political position.[158]

Thomas Rodney agreed. But Caesar did not wish for inquiries to be made. He already knew there were many loyalists in Kent and feared if a public inquiry was made it would reveal to the British exactly how many disaffected existed in the Delaware State. Furthermore, the elections to the Constitutional convention were being held in August, and Caesar thought that enquiries at the same time would annoy the populace and

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155 John A. Munroe, *Federalist Delaware*, 83.

156 Caesar Rodney, "Caesar Rodney's Bequests," 1784, original document, Rodney Collection, Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington.

157 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney 1756-1784*, 96.

158 Ibid., 95-7.

prejudice them against the Whigs.[159] More than the annual October elections was at stake: members for a Constitutional Convention, which would set the laws and government that would run Delaware throughout the war, were to be elected in the middle of August.

Thomas Rodney, flush with the Whigs' recent success, began planning for the Constitutional Convention elections. On July 30, he sent Caesar a letter which included a preliminary list of the men the Court party intended to back for the election. Caesar's name was on the list, alongside such men Charles Ridgely and John Clark – the man who was pilloried by the Whigs on June 8. Thomas, who was still serving on the Committee of Inspection for Kent, also informed Caesar of his intention to make enquiries into the loyalty of several of the men on the Court ticket, including Ridgely and Clark.[160] Thomas did not understand that the political climate had changed; he believed that the tactics that had served the Whigs so well in September 1775 would still work. Caesar did not agree. On August 3, he sent Thomas a letter in which he stressed the need to appeal to the populace's common sense rather than playing party politics. "Your scheme ought to hold out to the people more of the patriot than the party-man," he wrote, adding: "the people when un-irritated generally hearken to reason and make prudent choices."[161] Making enquiries at this time, Caesar believed, would only aggravate the voters.

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159 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 97-9.

160 Thomas Rodney, Dover, to Caesar Rodney, Philadelphia, 30 July 1776, John Dickinson Papers, Delaware Public Archives, Dover.

161 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 99-100.

Thomas and the other Whigs refused to heed Caesar's advice and enquiries were sent out. He sent Caesar a letter on August 5 with the Court party's finalized election choices listed, and this time Caesar's name was not on the list. It was the first time Caesar had been left off the Court ticket since he began his political career, and if it were not done in retribution for the enquiries Thomas had sent out, at the very least it was a clear indication that the Court party believed Caesar no longer served their interests. Thomas's ticket was filled with such familiar names as Killen, Banning, and Loockerman, and he was confident that the Whigs would carry the election. Nor could Thomas resist a jab at Charles Ridgely, writing that the doctor was considering not running for election but would undoubtedly "act behind the curtain."[162]

Caesar was not as optimistic as Thomas about the Whigs' chances in the Constitutional Convention elections. In two letters, one dated August 8, the other August 14, he once again pleaded with Thomas not to alienate people and to draw the populace's attention to the more important issues, which he saw as personal safety, freedom of religion, security of property, and equal distribution of justice, rather than pit Whig against Tory.[163] For the first time, Caesar appeared truly concerned about the outcome of an election. And, as usual, Caesar read the political situation correctly and Thomas incorrectly. On August 19, Thomas Rodney reported that the Kent County Whigs had been defeated for the State Constitutional Convention, losing their opportunity to make the rules that would govern their state throughout the war. Caesar had garnered more

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162 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 101-2.

163 Ibid., 102-3.

votes than anyone else on the Whig ticket, but not enough to win him a seat in the convention.[164] It was the first time since 1771 that Caesar had suffered defeat in a major election. Charles Ridgely won a Kent seat, as did John Clark, Thomas White, and Richard Basset, the three men most responsible for the Black Monday uprising. Sussex County, experiencing election difficulties, returned a double ticket of twenty men: a ticket of ten Whigs and a ticket of ten Tories/moderates. After some deliberation, the moderate ticket was chosen to represent Sussex County at the convention, perhaps backed by George Read, as James Tilton accused.[165] Even New Castle County elected only a few Whigs, such as Thomas McKean. Some of the men who were elected to the convention were outright loyalists, such as Joshua Hill of Sussex who in 1777 would murder two soldiers who came to arrest him before fleeing to the British.[166]

The Constitutional Convention, with George Read as president, exchanged Delaware's proprietary governor for an elected official, a president whose powers were severely curtailed by the Assembly. He lacked veto power, held limited powers of appointment, and could not create any new laws without the approval of a four man committee assigned by the Assembly.[167] The unicameral government was changed into a bicameral one, with the upper branch being a nine-man body called the Legislative

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164 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 104.

165 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 56.

166 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 24-5.

167 John A. Munroe, "Delaware and the American Revolution," *Delaware History*, Vol. 17 (1976-77), 2-11.

Council, and the lower being the House of Assembly with twenty-one members, seven from each county. Aside from these changes, Delaware's system of government remained virtually the same. The Delaware Constitution merely adapted its colonial status into an independent one.[168] Also during the convention, sixty residents of Sussex petitioned for pardon for armed insurrection and were pardoned to the extent of having their arms returned to them.[169] Thomas McKean, one of the few radicals in the convention, was disgusted with his companions' moderation. Writing to Caesar Rodney, he claimed that the moderates had already decided everything "out of doors" and every motion he, McKean, tried to pass was defeated. Clearly he missed Caesar's support. At one session he became so irritated that he took up his hat and left.[170] Thomas Rodney bitterly referred to the Constitutional Convention as "our Tory convention," although in fact most of the members of the Convention were moderates.[171]

George Read of New Castle County, the conservative who had voted against Lee's resolution, was the most powerful politician in Delaware for the second half of 1776. "No puffing quack ever exerted more absolute domination over the qualmish stomach of his sick and trembling patient," wrote John Haslet in reference to Read's control of the Constitutional Convention.[172] Under his guidance, the General Assembly

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168 Gibson, ed., *The Collected Essays of Richard S. Rodney*, 19.

169 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 49.

170 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 123-4.

171 Ibid., 111.

172 as quoted in Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 56.

filled all vacant political positions with moderates and outright loyalists.[173] George Read was a friend of Caesar, and their relationship remained cordial even throughout this period. In light of George Read's grandson's remarks quoted earlier, it is possible that Read believed he was keeping the peace in Delaware by allowing moderates to fill so many offices, but it set up a disastrous situation for 1777.

For the remainder of 1776, the Whigs continued to lose the ground they had gained in 1775. In October, none of the Kent Whigs, not even Caesar, won a seat on either the Legislative Council or the House of Assembly. The elections in Lewes were tumultuous. Henry Fisher, a Sussex Whig, was beaten and abused by a crowd that felled the liberty tree and barred access to voting to anyone who would not swear fidelity to King George.[174] Naturally, Sussex returned a deeply conservative ticket, as did Kent. New Castle's ticket was a mixture of Whigs, Tories, and moderates. Many of the men who were elected had been in the Constitutional Convention.[175] George Read was the Speaker of the Legislative Council, a position tantamount to being the vice-president of the state. In November, the General Assembly (as the gathering of the Legislative Council and the House of Assembly was called) removed both Caesar Rodney and Thomas McKean as congressional delegates, allowing only George Read to remain. John Evans, a moderate, and John Dickinson, who had stood against Lee's resolution, were

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173 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 27-8.

174 Delaware Public Archives. *The Delaware Archives: Revolutionary War in Three Volumes, Volume III and Index* (Wilmington: Chas L. Story Company Press, 1919), 1367-8.

175 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 557-8.

appointed to Congress in place of Rodney and McKean, although both Dickinson and Evans refused to attend.[176] The only offices left to Caesar were his commission as a brigadier-general of militia and his seat on the Kent Council of Safety. His brother Thomas likewise lost his seat in the Assembly.

Caesar appeared disgusted by his defeats and tired of politics. Letters written to John Haslet in October indicate that he was thinking of retiring from public life. Another letter, this one written to a friend in Philadelphia after he lost his position as congressional delegate stated: "If it should be my misfortune to be obliged to leave home and attend Congress I shall be with you." Caesar knew that he would not be attending Congress in 1777; in the first part of this letter Caesar thanked this friend for sending the rest of his [Caesar's] personal effects home to Dover.[177] The Kent Whigs entered the year 1777 as a defeated and dejected lot, although ironically, Caesar Rodney's health improved dramatically after being relieved of most of his offices.[178] The backlash against Delaware Whigs in general and the Kent County Whigs in particular was thorough, and it would take the invasion of the British army to restore them to their former position of power.

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176 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 248.

177 Caesar Rodney, Dover, to ?, Philadelphia, 30 November, 1776, Caesar Rodney Collection, Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington. Speculation: the addressee could be William Hooper, a delegate from North Carolina who was a close friend of Caesar.

178 Scott, *A Gentleman as Well as a Whig*, 147.

It is not the purpose of this essay to recount how the Whig party in Kent once again seized control of the government during 1777, but as the events of that year have bearing on the lives of the Rodney brothers, a brief summary may prove useful. Loyalists flourished in Kent and Sussex counties for the first half of 1777, mostly because the Assembly appeared to have no interest in suppressing them.[179] John McKinly, a Whig from New Castle, was chosen as president of the Delaware State, but he was at heart a conservative man who never seemed able to decide on which side of the issues he truly stood. Thomas Rodney described McKinly as "the only man who can exactly reflect the complexion of the state."[180] McKinly, perhaps sensing that he was not fully qualified for his position, often sought Caesar Rodney's advice, especially on what to do about the trouble with loyalists.[181] Caesar was the right person to ask, as he spent the spring and summer of 1777 putting down Tory insurrections in upper Sussex, an action that would later prove most beneficial to the Whig party.[182]

Then, in September, came the event that changed everything for Delaware. George Washington was defeated at the Battle of Brandywine on September 11. The British invaded Wilmington, took President McKinly hostage, and carried off many

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179 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 31.

180 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 178-180.

181 Ibid., 181-101, *passim*.

182 Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware*, 68-9.

political papers.[183] George Read, as chairman of the Legislative Council, should have taken control after McKinly's abduction, but he was in Philadelphia at the time, and soon fled to New Jersey. Thomas McKean, the Speaker of the House of Assembly, became the de facto head of state in his place.[184] It was also at this time that several prominent loyalists joined the British side, including Thomas Robinson and Boaz Manlove.

The British invasion of Delaware proved even more divisive than the resolution of Congress had in the year of 1776, as not even those who lived in the most isolated areas of Sussex County could ignore it. This was reflected in the October elections, which proved even more tumultuous than those of the prior year. This time, in another reversal of the last year's events, it was the Whigs who chased the Tories out of the courthouse in Lewes.[185] Due to the confusion over voting, Sussex County could not promptly return a ticket. In the meantime, New Castle County returned a Whig ticket while Kent County returned a moderate one. Thus, the Assembly stalemated until December, when Sussex, to Caesar Rodney's delight, returned a Whig ticket. The new, Whig-dominated assembly would, in his opinion, rouse Delaware "from its heretofore torpid state."[186]

Caesar Rodney reached the pinnacle of his political career when he was elected President of the Delaware State in March 1778. John Dickinson was one of the other

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183 Munroe, "Delaware and the American Revolution," 7.

184 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 32.

185 Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney*, 32.

186 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 253-4.

nominees for the office, but Caesar received a clear majority: twenty out of the twenty-four votes cast.[187] This is, again, not the place for a detailed analysis of Caesar's presidential career, but his most important duties were to bring stability to the little state and to feed, arm, and clothe the members of its military. Early in his term as president, during the summer of 1778, a Test Act was instituted in Delaware that forced people to take an oath of allegiance to the revolutionary government before they were permitted to vote. This kept Delaware's government in the hands of the Whigs until the act was repealed in 1785.[188]

Thomas Rodney prospered alongside his brother, being awarded position after position of prominence. The years of Caesar's presidency were lucrative ones for Thomas, who occasionally turned down one office in favor of a higher-paying one. Nor was he, from the scanty records that remain, adverse to a little bootlegging.[189] Here another difference between the two brothers appears; when Thomas asked Caesar to use the office of president to temporarily lift an embargo on flour for their own personal gain, Caesar responded that he would never think of suspending an act for any private purpose, especially one in which he was personally concerned.[190] Unlike Thomas, Caesar never used politics for monetary gain. On the contrary, while few records remain, there is evidence to suggest that Caesar drew on his own funds to provide Delaware's

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187 Bushman, Hancock, and Homsey, ed., *Proceedings*, 379.

188 Munroe, *Federalist Delaware*, 88.

189 Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney*, 33-5.

190 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 381.

soldiers with necessities.[191]

Caesar Rodney ended his term of presidency in November 1781 as a very ill man. He immediately left for Philadelphia and put himself under the care of Dr. Thomas Bond. Yet the Assembly, accustomed to Caesar's guiding presence, was reluctant to allow him his needed rest. In 1781 he was elected as a delegate to Congress, although he proved too ill to serve.[192] In the fall of 1783, he was elected as the Speaker of the Legislative Council, in effect, the second most powerful man in Delaware. But by this time, Caesar was so weak that it was agreed that the Legislative Council would hold its meetings at his house in the spring of 1784, as he was unable to travel. Thomas, who had lost his wife Elizabeth in October 1783, now moved into Caesar's home to care for his brother. Caesar died in June 1784. Thomas was shattered. In one of the journals he wrote during the early nineteenth century, when he was reliving the glory days of his youth, he recorded occurrences for every year from 1772 to 1802 – except for one gap. In the year 1784, the only event recorded was Caesar's death. There are no more entries until 1791.[193] Thomas's seven year silence was more eloquent than a thousand words detailing the bond between the two brothers.

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191 Ward, *The Delaware Continentals*, 204.

192 Scott, *A Gentleman as Well as a Whig*, 207.

193 Thomas Rodney Writings, 1700s, Delaware Public Archives, Dover, Delaware, text-fiche.

Conclusion

The Rodney brothers' success in bringing the Revolution to Delaware hinged largely on the peculiarity of Delaware's makeup; if the balance of three counties had not existed, the Rodneys' role would not have been so pivotal. They also benefitted from the inability of many Delaware leaders to take a firm stance either for or against independence. In his study of Pennsylvania's politics leading up to the Revolution, Ryerson wrote: "enemies made at each stage in the revolutionary movement were too few and too passive. . . so that no effective opposition formed to check the ever stronger and more legitimized patriot faction."[194] This did not entirely hold true in Delaware: the opposition was for the most part as well organized as the patriots were, as can be demonstrated by the circulation of petitions that took place on June 8, 1776 in Kent County, and as adept at seizing power. What is revealed in a study of Delaware's politics from 1774 to 1776 was that the Whigs were, in general, more adept at using power when it came to them. The Tories, when they had command of the government from the latter half of 1776 through all of 1777, accomplished little when it came to securing either safety or independence for the people of their colony. The most effective politicians in Delaware during the Revolution were Whigs, and the Rodneys, being patriots in a county that was mostly populated with moderates and Tories, were instrumental in keeping Delaware in line with its sister colonies.

Thomas Rodney, in the final analysis, cannot be regarded as a successful

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194 Ryerson, *The Revolution is Now Begun*, 45.

politician. After his brother Caesar's death in 1784, he continued to participate within the Delaware government, serving as a delegate to Congress, and even being elected as Speaker of the Assembly in 1787.[195] But the Test Act, requiring citizens to swear fealty to the revolutionary government before voting had expired, and more and more conservatives were winning elections. Thomas did not seem to understand that times had once again changed. Nor did he appear to have ever gained the respect of his peers that Caesar had enjoyed. In the late 1780s, he entered into an ill-advised lawsuit against his neighbor John Vining, claiming that Vining owed money against Caesar's estate. Thomas was, as Hamilton puts it, "Bankrupt and in bad odor." The case went against him, and in 1792 he was thrown into debtor's prison.[196]

The 1790s were the worst years of Thomas's life. Perhaps to console himself, he made, in his many journals and letters, countless claims to his own importance to the American cause. In a letter dated March 1791, he insisted that his enemies – and by this he could have meant his opposition in the lawsuit, the populace who had failed to seat him at the last election, or the conservative Assembly – hated him because he was solely responsible for American liberty. According to Thomas, Caesar only made his overnight ride of July 1 because Thomas's Light Horse company turned out to convince Caesar of its necessity.[197] Visions, prophecies, and many other forms of self-delusion, many of

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195 Hamilton, *Thomas Rodney*, 49.

196 Ibid., 50-2.

197 Thomas Rodney, Dover, to Dr. Evans, New Castle, 10 March 1791, original in the hand of Thomas Rodney, Thomas Rodney Collection, Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington.

them featuring Caesar, were common to Thomas at the end of the eighteenth century. Even though Caesar was dead, Thomas still attached his hopes for glory to his brother's name, as he had first entered the political arena under his brother's influence. It was not until Thomas was afforded the opportunity to head west for Mississippi and become a judge of that territory that he could claim accomplishments that were entirely his own. In leaving Delaware, Thomas appeared to have finally left his elder brother's ghost behind as well. But Thomas Rodney should not be remembered solely for his eccentricities, for he was instrumental in establishing independence for Delaware – perhaps not as dramatically as he would have wanted, but legitimate all the same. With Caesar away in Philadelphia, someone was required to marshal the Whigs during the years 1774 through 1776. Thomas Rodney was that man, and if occasionally his actions were rash, at least they proved effective at the critical juncture.

Of the Rodney brothers, Caesar remains, deservedly, the man who receives the greater share of the credit for bringing the Revolution to Delaware. Thomas could not have accomplished it himself as he did not possess Caesar's experience, much less his respect. Indeed, without Caesar's influence, Thomas may never have become entangled in politics in the first place. Caesar masterminded the most important events leading up to the Revolution in Kent County, and his influence was felt throughout the entire colony of Delaware. Respected even by his enemies, no scandal has survived over the centuries to tarnish his name or his accomplishments. The many offices that were bestowed on him may have ultimately shortened his life, as he was never afforded the opportunity to rest and recover his health -- but one might as justly say the cause kept him alive, for at the

time of his death, he had been living with his cancer for over fifteen years. He died only a few months after the final treaty with the British was signed, as if sensing that his life's work was finally achieved.

Caesar Rodney did not keep a diary, or at least none has ever been found. Whatever specific event, if there was one, that led him to become Delaware's most prominent patriot and inspire his younger brother to become one likewise remains unknown. Prior to 1774, there was little indication that Rodney would play such a vital role in securing independence for Delaware. The closest one can come to a revelation about Caesar's motives is found in a letter to an unknown recipient, probably dating to the winter of 1782, not long after Caesar had left the office of president of the Delaware State. Grievously ill with cancer, Rodney was in the care of a Philadelphia physician who assured him of a cure. Rodney himself was not so optimistic: "Was I left to form a judgement from my own feelings, I should not be very sanguine." Rodney suspected that he was dying. The sentiments expressed in this letter therefore become, in a sense, his final words:

> "When the contest between Great Britain and America first commenced, I stepped forth among others in order to obtain a redress of grievances. This and no other was my aim until absolutely refused. The question then was independence or the bayonet, I was at no loss determining which to choose. Independence then necessarily became the American cause, to this cause I have strictly adhered. . . but Sir, I always kept in view the good order well being and happiness of the people, more especially those over whom I lately had the honor to preside and

trust that none who know me believe otherwise."[198]

Caesar Rodney will probably never be anything more than a man on a horse to most Americans today. Thomas Rodney and his delusions of grandeur are mostly forgotten. But together, these two brothers accomplished something remarkable: independence for Delaware. No one can say for certain what would have happened to the fate of the United States if Delaware had refused to separate from Britain, but it certainly would have changed the outcome of the war. The story of the Rodney brothers proves that dedicated people who act with determination can affect the outcome of history, even in the smallest of places.

198 Ryden, ed., *Letters To and From Caesar Rodney*, 430-1.

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Abbreviations:

DPA: The Delaware Public Archives, Dover, Delaware.
HSD: The Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington, Delaware.
HSP: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Autograph Collection. HSP.

Dickinson Papers. DPA

Thomas McKean Papers. HSD.

George Read Papers. HSD.

Ridgely Papers. DPA.

Caesar and Thomas Rodney Papers. H. F. Brown Collection and Society's Collection. HSD.

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Vita

Ann Elizabeth Decker was born in Reading, Pennsylvania to parents David Richard Decker and Debra Rae Hoffman. In 1988, she graduated from Freedom High School in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and was granted a special prize for writing by the English department. Her initial field of study was theater, but after a few years, she changed to literature, and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1998. After a few years spent tutoring students in English as a Second Language, she decided to return to school for a Masters degree in History.

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